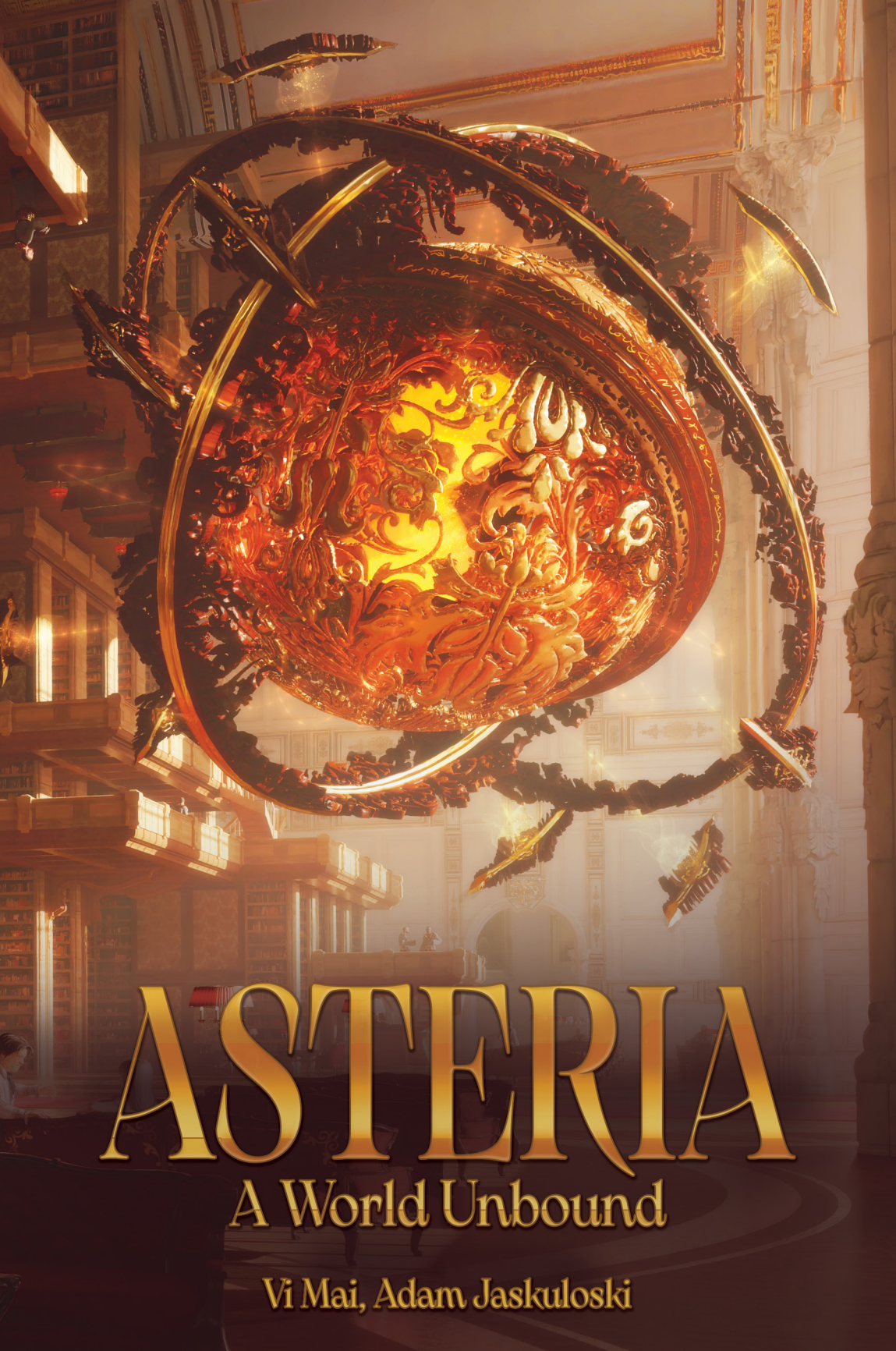




ASTERIA

A World Unbound

Vi Mai, Adam Jaskuloski

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ASTERIA: A WORLD UNBOUND

BOOK ONE OF THE ASTERIA CHRONICLES



BY VI MAI & ADAM JASKULOSKI

ASTERIA: A WORLD UNBOUND - Preview Edition

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Written by Vi Mai and Adam Jaskuloski

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For more information, or to learn more about the large, interactive World Map, visit:
www.worldasteria.com



For those who wander in the wake of
echoes. May they guide you across worlds.

PROLOGUE

The world was born when the sky fell. It created a pulse as it crashed into the earth, and it continued to pulse with life, even to this day.

— Si'ila, The Speckled Witness

Small puffs of cold air escaped the Redwind rogue's mouth as he stood on top of a stone pillar. The blizzarding frost and constant snowfall always blanketed the winding mountain paths this far up the barely carved trail. Still, he had grown accustomed to the harsh cold. Vendin, Raven of Trost, kept a watchful eye on his target—a lone wanderer navigating the slippery crevices and crumbling roads, inching steadily forward.

To where? He didn't know.

The wanderer took a few more steps, and then he stopped. Light armor, a small bag, a leather-bound book, and an intricate sword etched with fiery designs adorned his figure. His stallion neighed in the cold air, though horses rarely thrived in this frigid height.

Magic, perhaps?

Vendin swiftly double-checked his gear. The man had been out here searching for something, and someone with the mettle to brave these colds wouldn't be caught off-guard so easily. Whatever the case, the traveler had what he needed—and he had a price to pay.

There was no room for mistakes.

Three Windstreak Hawks perched by Vendin's side, their sharp eyes locked on the lone traveler. One rested on his shoulder, another balanced on his fingertips, and the third stood watch atop a nearby tree. With their dark bodies and bright maroon-tipped feathers, the native birds of Dventos were not only his eyes, scanning the man for any weaknesses, but they were also his constant companions.

Vendin looked down, and as the traveler's body shifted ever so slightly, they both knew.

He'd already sensed him—there was no need for deception. No trick or clever scheme would tip the scales now.

Not against this person.

The wanderer held steady, but his hands stayed ready, prepared for any move Vendin might make. Drawing his Dual Ravens, twin magesteel daggers that thrummed in the cold air, Vendin landed smoothly on the rugged terrain below. Sensing the threat, the traveler unsheathed his longsword, its edge gleaming as he braced for the coming clash. Vendin recognized the sword, the Dragon's Tooth.

Meeting Vendin's gaze, the man steadied his breath, and their eyes stayed locked, each measuring the other, reading the terrain. The wind whistled through the silence, the only sound between them. Vendin knew no words would be exchanged—only action.

Then, the traveler struck first, lunging with lightning speed. But Vendin was faster. He moved with ease, outpacing his opponent effortlessly.

Soon, their blades met with a sharp ring, but Vendin remained unnervingly composed. His Third Vision hummed—an ability that unraveled every shift in balance, every subtle hitch in his opponent's stance. Through his own eyes and the keen sight of his hawks, he saw everything: the snow-blind terrain, the traveler's tensed shoulders, his firm grip on the Dragon's Tooth. No weakness went unnoticed.

"Who sent you?" The traveler's voice was low, edged with the weariness of too many battles in too many places. "Another bounty hunter? Or just a fool with a death wish?"

"You should know," Vendin didn't blink. "Debts don't settle themselves."

The traveler's lips curled into a humorless smile. "And you're the mongrel they sent to collect? Really?"

"Mongrels bite," Vendin said, his tone flat.

The traveler's smile faded, his voice hardening. "Don't think you'll walk away unscathed. I've dealt with people like you before. You're just another footnote. Nothing more."

"Right." A muscle twitched in Vendin's jaw. "That's what they all say."

His dagger moved as the word finished—a whip-crack motion, steel aimed not at flesh but at the nearby stallion's tendon. Vendin knew the first move was to ground the beast that accompanied him. If he couldn't win this battle, then he'd at least slow him down.

But the traveler reacted quickly, snatching the dagger from the air before it could reach the horse. Seizing that moment, Vendin activated his ability, and both of his blades ignited. Crackling arcs of blue energy snaked up the traveler's arms, hissing like storm-winds through wire.

Lightning Strikes Twice.



The ability paralyzed the traveler as the daggers, crackling with a lightning aura, pulsed a bluish glow, transmuting the air. The traveler, caught off guard, dropped the dagger—another costly mistake.

The charge bled into the snow, and the horse staggered, its legs locking mid-step, as the current rooted both man and beast in place. Vendin's grin curled into something feral as he lunged, closing the distance in an instant.

With a blade angled for his chest, victory was his.

... At least, that's how he'd imagined it.

Instead, the traveler's roar shattered the air. Fire erupted around him in a scorching corona that melted snow to steam instantly. His skin flushed crimson, his eyes burning with raw heat and his veins alight like molten fissures.

The man took a breath, pausing, and then the inferno poured from his lips, devouring the space between them.

Vendin's reflexes snapped taut, narrowly avoiding the flames and snatching up the other of his Dual Ravens, the blade nearly slipping out of his palms slicked with sweat. He didn't hesitate, defaulting to instinct: retreat, not attack. A backward leap carried him away, his boots skidding across stone that became scorched black moments after. He pivoted into a defensive stance, every step precise, his muscles coiled like springs from a thousand drills.

A hook line shot out from his wrist, its claw sinking into a nearby rock pillar, and he hauled himself up, his boots scrambling for purchase. Crouched on the ledge, breath sawed in his throat, heart hammering against his ribs.

"It has been a long time since I've been pushed to use this ability," the traveler said, his breath ragged from the exchange. "Most rogues lack the intellect to devise a plan as even half as complex as yours. I commend you."

He raised his sword to his chest, and the blade ignited, a molten glow spreading across its surface. Vendin didn't understand what it meant, but instinct told him that a direct strike from that blade would sear his flesh, burning him to the bone.

It would kill him.

"This is a Circle Three, fire-aligned ability," the traveler said, his voice clear and authoritative as he stretched his arms outward. "It allows me to shroud myself in a blazing aura of mana, both within and around my body. Anything that touches me within this aura will be burned or singed, and my weapons grow stronger and more durable."

Vendin widened his eyes.

He's revealing his technique?

It must've been one of his conditions for using the ability, and for the ferocity it granted him, it was likely a worthwhile trade. Vendin processed his words, trying to devise a strategy, but the traveler gave him no time. In a flash, he closed the distance. Vendin leaped back, startled by the sudden speed, and the sword



missed him by inches, its aura of heat leaving minor burns on his skin. He gritted his teeth, the sting sharp against his resolve.

His speed nearly tripled.

Vendin grimaced, realizing that taking the traveler head-on was futile. He had to change tactics, and fast. Pressing his hands together, he activated his trump card: Lightning Step. Though he'd hoped to save it for later, he had no choice but to use it now.

The air around him crackled, charged with electricity. His speed surged, reflexes sharpening as the ability coursed through him, igniting every muscle in his legs.

Vendin darted toward the traveler, sidestepping a deadly sword swing at the last possible moment. Blows came fast, each strike more precise than the last. Now, the tide had turned. Vendin weaved through the traveler's attacks, dodging and countering with ease, landing quick, damning cuts across his body.

The wounds were minor, but they piled up. Each time a cut seared shut—cauterized by the traveler's own technique—he winced, the pain slowing him down ever so slightly. But after a while, he couldn't endure the assault much longer. Finally, with a mighty sweep of his sword, the traveler released a circular wheel of flames that radiated outward.

It seemed he wasn't taking this lightly anymore.

The pressure slammed into Vendin like a battering ram, hurling him backward into the snow. His body skidded across the icy ground, struggling for traction, but the traveler was relentless. He surged forward with raw, animalistic force, leaving Vendin no room to recover. A brutal kick to his abdomen sent him crashing down, pain exploding through him.

Blood spilled from Vendin's mouth as he lay writhing in agony, gasping for air. The traveler stepped closer, and a cold, sharp fear washed over him. Vendin cursed under his breath. Why had the Aevum sent him after someone like this? This was far beyond his paygrade.

But even through the terror, his connection with his Windstreak Hawks kicked in. He sensed it—the traveler wasn't planning to kill him just yet.

"Tell me," the traveler said, his voice low. "Why have you come to assassinate me?"

"Assassinate?" Vendin's eyes flicked up, surprised. The traveler was far too dangerous for that. If that had been his goal, he'd never have come alone.

"My goal isn't your assassination," Vendin coughed, blood staining his lips. "You owe debts to my employer. I'm merely here to collect—nothing more."

"I owe many people a great deal of things," the traveler said, his tone flat. "You'll have to be more specific."

Vendin paused. "The House of Aevum."

Those words landed like a hammer, and the traveler froze, his face unreadable for a moment before he nodded slowly.



"You're sure?" the traveler asked.

Vendin nodded.

"Then, my apologies," he said, extending a hand to help Vendin up. "If the Aevum truly wanted me dead, I wouldn't still be standing."

"I see we're both in agreement." Vendin nodded.

He knew better than anyone the might of the Aevum. They were no ordinary house, and their operatives, the Aevum Imperia, were monsters themselves, feared and respected as the Duke of Trost's most lethal enforcers. Pride aside, Vendin knew he didn't even compare. The Aevum had crushed rebellions and silenced threats to thrones for generations. Their reputation was earned, not given.

"As per your contract," Vendin said, his tone firm, "you owe one thousand gold Vinar coins for their services." He retrieved a leather-bound book from his bag before adding, "If you cannot pay, negotiations can be arranged. If you refuse to pay, next time, it will not just be me. They'll cut you where you stand."

The traveler scratched his head, looking sheepish. "I'm on a mission for King Bel of Tenebris," he revealed. "I don't have the funds on hand, but perhaps this will work as a down-payment."

He handed Vendin a heavy object. Closer inspection revealed a sizable crystalline mana shard, shaped like a great, curved horn. Vendin recognized it at once—a horn from the Bluefrost Yeti, one of the fearsome mountain beasts that prowled the Vasir Mountains.

"Very well, this will suffice," Vendin said, taking the shard with a nod, his fingers brushing its edge. He knew its value. "Next time, think twice before attacking without explanation."

"Don't play coy," the traveler shot back. "You were stalking me like a vulture."

"I was simply monitoring you," Vendin replied, his voice cutting through the air. "Don't twist my actions."

The man chuckled. "Seems we both share some blame, then."

"Perhaps so. But be careful. If anyone comes for you soon, know it won't be from the Aevum," Vendin said, his gaze hardening. "Well, I must be on my way. Good luck with the rest of your mission."

"Likewise," the traveler replied, his nod curt but not unkind. "And tell the Aevum I'm grateful for their... continued patience."

Vendin let out a sharp whistle, and his hawks dove down in unison. Two of them seized the massive horn from his hands, their talons digging deep into its surface. The third hawk began to grow, its body swelling until it was large enough to bear his weight. Vendin swung onto its back, and with a rush of wind, they shot into the sky, leaving the traveler alone on the mountain path. His gaze remained fixed on the shimmering blue gem.

The mission was complete. The horn was his.

Now, Trost awaited.



PART ONE

A Land of Magic



House Aevum

House Aevum first emerged with the founding of the Second Kingdom, Gatam, as guardians to the throne of Scezitar. However, it wasn't until their expansion into the unknown lands of Asteria that they truly flourished under the embrace of magic.

CHAPTER ONE

No greater suffering exists than loss. To know the feeling of having something, only to be reminded that you no longer do. To imagine a reality where things went differently. Endure an eternity of sorrow, or embrace the mercy of death: the choice is yours.

— Nvthgkv, Hbi Jouaa

Aaron opened his eyes.

His irises were glistening with a tone of vivid golden—bright with an auburn hue that gave a shining glint in the air, reminiscent of the autumn leaves. He blinked a few times and looked around, slightly disoriented but aware of his surroundings. As they adjusted to the warm light, his mind reeled in. Initially, Aaron thought he was in chains or being held captive—the usual assumption when he couldn't immediately recall his surroundings. However, to his surprise, he found himself lying on a plush seat, his aching muscles bearing witness to the exertions of days gone by.

But where exactly was he?

Aaron knew he was clearly in motion, evident by the subtle rocking back and forth, and he listened intently to the noises around him to learn more. Initially the sound was barely audible, a faint murmur in his ears, but as he concentrated, it intensified, transforming into a distinct and growing resonance that resembled the gentle patter of rocks cascading over a water wheel.

... Horses?

He supposed it wouldn't be the strangest thing to find in Chicago, but what confused him more than the sound of their clattering hooves was the absence of other noise. The bustle of the streets, the din of urbanity—if he was still in the city, why didn't he hear it?

Was he still in the city?

Scanning his surroundings, Aaron determined that he was within a large and opulent carriage. Rising to his feet, he beheld the intricate details adorning the carriage's walls. Golden designs and ivory engravings sparkled with a touch of what seemed to be Renaissance Europe, all delicately laced with faithful ornamentations.

"Stop," He cleared his throat with a forceful cough.

He swallowed hard. The words that erupted from his lips were as dry as a desert breeze, but his voice was still evident. Upon his command, the carriage screeched to a halt, its wheels grinding against the rough gravel. Despite the harsh rasp of his parched throat, his voice was different. It was unfamiliar... almost alien.

Was it just a trick of his mind?

"What troubles you, Master Aaron?" a rough voice came from the front of the carriage.

Aaron tilted his head. "How do you know my name?"

And Master? Who on earth would call him that?

There was a pause. Then a slow shake of the head. "Has it really gotten that bad?"

"Has what?"

The voice chuckled. "What exactly have you been drinking, my boy?"

Aaron fell silent, confused.

What did he mean by that?

"Still feeling under the weather, I presume?" the voice chuckled, giving a light nod. "Don't worry too much. Just sit back and relax. It's been my task to escort you for quite some time now."

Aaron frowned, confusion settling deeper. "I don't understand," he muttered, glancing around, trying to make sense of this unexpected turn. "Where are you escorting me to?"

"To your residence, of course," the servant replied, his tone completely unreadable.

Aaron's scowl deepened. "My... residence?" He was about to ask more, but something about the way the servant said it—so casually, like this was normal—made him hesitate. "I don't remember arranging for an escort, much less a... mysterious one."

The servant's voice softened, carrying a touch of amusement. "Ah, well, I suppose that comes with the territory, considering how much you've been celebrating." He gave a slight chuckle before continuing, "But worry not. I'm quite reliable when it comes to these things."

Aaron blinked, trying to piece together the situation. How had he ended up in this carriage? And why was it heading toward his 'residence'? There was one place he could've thought of that fit the bill, but he would've never called it home.

He pressed his fingers to his temples, hoping to clear the fog clouding his thoughts. A strange sensation inundated him, the feeling of distant memories



being dredged up like fragments of a forgotten dream. Faces and voices swirled around him, tantalizingly close but just out of reach. It felt like trying to catch a butterfly in a storm—he could tell they were there, but they slipped away every time he tried to grab them, like sand through his fingers.

Aaron was silent for too long, but he snapped back to his senses soon enough, “Continue on our journey,” he replied softly, his voice decisive. “And please tell me everything you know.”

The chauffeur, donned in leather attire, which happened to be a person he soon discovered bore the name of William, lightly flicked the reins and surged the carriage forward.

Bouncing along the uneven road, William spoke with a voice that held a mysterious charm. “What is there to know? I’ve been a loyal servant to your father, tasked with bringing you home. This isn’t the first time you’ve found yourself in a state like this, I’m sure.”

“I... don’t have a father,” Aaron interjected, his voice flat.

“Ah, yes... family matters. Complicated things,” William replied, waving a hand dismissively. “If that’s your view, I won’t press the issue. For now, let’s just say I’ve been retained as your butler for this particular occasion.”

Aaron sat silently for several more minutes, his mind racing as he tried to piece together his tangled memories. But like a shattered mirror, his thoughts were fractured and incomplete. With a frustrated sigh, he sat upright and leaned against the coach seat, crossing his arms. “Can I ask where we’re coming from, then?”

The driver’s unexpected behavior disrupted the carriage’s atmosphere. A hearty chuckle burst from him, echoing throughout the enclosed space. “Why, your very own birthday celebration!” he exclaimed. “Although, given the extent of your indulgence, I’m not surprised to hear you may have forgotten much of what the night had to offer.”

“How severe was it?”

“If I recall, there were at least three escorts involved.”

“That’s...” Aaron paused. “That’s not that bad.”

“Unfortunately, they died.”

“Oh.” Aaron shook his head. “On second thought, I am actually having trouble remembering many things at the moment,” he admitted.

“That much is understandable,” the driver nodded thoughtfully. “You’re fortunate to have a family that’s... lenient with these things. Though, I suppose, what family wouldn’t do favors for their own kin?” He gave a small, knowing smile. “I’m confident your memory will return in due time. However, may I suggest summoning our alchemist to assist with your recovery once we reach your residence?”



"An alchemist?" Aaron raised an eyebrow, his voice edged with skepticism. "No, there's no need for that. I've had my fair share of unpleasant experiences with vials, no matter what's inside them."

"As you wish," the driver shrugged, turning his focus back to the road. "But should you have any further inquiries, feel free to ask. That said, I would recommend sticking to sanctioned brews at future parties. Or at least bringing a guard to test them first."

Aaron gave a small, appreciative smile. "Thank you for the advice, William."

As the carriage rumbled forward, Aaron leaned back, his gaze fixed on his feet. He briefly entertained the thought that he might've been trapped in a dream—a carefully woven illusion probing the depths of his mind to uncover its secrets. He'd heard rumors of advanced contraptions capable of such feats, machines so precise they could navigate the human mind's twists and turns, revealing truths even the harshest torture could not.

But that didn't make much sense, either.

Aaron furrowed his brow, delving deeper into his thoughts. Closing his eyes, he reached into the past, searching for any clue to decipher his current predicament. If this was a dream, it was the most vivid he'd ever known. The world around him felt too real—he could sense the soft leather beneath him, feel the breeze brushing his face, and bask in the sun's warmth filtering through the carriage window.

And then, a thought struck Aaron.

He ran his tongue over his teeth and felt the back of his throat, but he struggled to find what he was looking for.

"Not there," he whispered under his breath, frowning.

But why?

He tried using his hands instead, but the result was the same, and a slight panic grew as Aaron prodded around his mouth, his heart skipping a beat. Had he lost it? Had he misplaced the one thing that could keep him safe from torture?

Aaron shut his eyes, straining to remember. But remember what, exactly?

Ah... right.

It came crashing back, sharp and almost painful in its clarity. He had died, that much was certain. The feeling of the cold seeping through his body and the crushing weight of exhaustion as his life slipped away lingered in his mind. Yet here he was, inexplicably alive. If this wasn't a dream, then how was it possible?

He closed his eyes again, inhaling deeply as his palms pressed against his chest, searching for the reassuring rhythm of his heartbeat. Despite the strong pulse beneath his fingertips, a nagging unease lingered. His eyes snapped open, his hands dropping to the spot where his necklace—a cherished keepsake—should have rested.

But to his shock, it was no longer there.

"Hey, when will we arrive again?" Aaron looked up abruptly.



"In a few hours, I presume," William replied coolly.

"Hm," Aaron leaned forward. "And what about my father?"

"Pardon?" William asked.

"I'm asking why did he send you, a butler, instead of coming himself?" Aaron persisted. "Is he too important to bother with his own son?"

William scoffed. "He is much too busy managing Trost. His work as its duke allows you to live the lavish... *lifestyle* you desire, so I'm sure you can understand."

"Duke, hm?" Aaron mused, his gaze fixed on the horizon. "And what of my role?" The carriage rumbled forward, the driver's horse snorting.

"What do you mean by that?" William asked, lightly whipping the reins.

Aaron's gaze never wavered. "Well, you say my father is the Duke of Trost, right? Surely, he has plans for his lands and people—plans that might require my involvement."

The driver chuckled, "Worry not. Your father has already delegated those responsibilities, some to your siblings. As for you, your plans are rather vague, wouldn't you say?"

"I see..." Aaron contemplated.

"Are you sure you're alright?" William asked, his tone laced with concern. "Forgetting simple things like that isn't good for you, even in your state."

Aaron glanced up, his thoughts drifting. "It's not that," he said, shrugging lightly. "There's just been a lot on my plate lately, you know? Sometimes a little reminder is all it takes to clear things up." He tried to offer a casual smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Getting suddenly interested in your birthright?" William raised an eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Does your exile finally stir something inside you?"

Exile?

"Perhaps. Can you remind me of my exile?" Aaron asked.

"I know you don't give your father's words much concern," he sighed, "but with matters like these, don't you think it would be pertinent to stay informed?"

"Sorry. I just forgot the exact date."

William's smirk faded, replaced by a look that was harder to read. "Understandable," he said, his voice even. "Your exile is just a year away. Soon after the Asterian Calendar marks its 100th year, you'll turn twenty and be required to leave the family estate."

Aaron's curiosity sparked, but he kept it to himself. His mind still swirled in a fog, but he already had a lot to think about, and pushing William for more now might only raise unwanted suspicion.

"If that's the case," Aaron sighed, "Then slow down a bit. Let me take in the sights."

"Are you certain?" William asked. "Staying idle will only increase your risk."

"I'm sure," Aaron assured him.



The butler nodded without a word and gently pulled the reins, slowing the carriage to a more leisurely pace. Aaron leaned back, gazing out the window as the vehicle glided forward.

The clouds were sparse, drifting lazily across the azure sky. The scenery was pleasant, yet a sense of unease gnawed at him—the feeling of being a stranger in a foreign land. Looking around, he realized he was surrounded by fifteen guards, each in gleaming armor adorned with intricate patterns and sashes. He assumed they were there to protect him, but still—

A bit overkill, wasn't it?

Aaron slumped in the seat, stopping just short of a sigh. A few thoughts passed through his mind, but the one that made the most sense was the least likely.

Reincarnation.

The word lingered, heavy in his mind like a pall.

“Exile too... What’s my next move supposed to be?” he muttered, his voice barely audible. Countless questions clamored for answers, but an overwhelming sense of doubt washed over him. Was there some greater force guiding him here, or was he simply... lost?

Aaron lingered in the sunlight of the open window a moment longer, taking in the scenery before finally shutting it and resting his head against the carriage wall. He closed his eyes, letting his mind slip into a deep slumber. The gentle rhythm of the carriage ambling along soothed him into sleep. For now, there were no answers, no truths to seek. He could only wait, hoping that clarity would eventually come.



Aaron’s eyes fluttered open, disoriented. It wasn’t just the lingering effects of his illness clouding his mind, but there was something else too—an unfamiliar sensation. Memories surged, intricate and vivid yet foreign and jumbled together.

But where had they come from?

Despite their presence, they were difficult to grasp, crashing over him like waves, at one moment overwhelming him and at another receding into the distance.

A woman’s face appeared, her soothing voice weaving tales, though he couldn’t recall what of. Then came another memory—a man instructing him—and several faces more flashed through his mind. But as his awareness increasingly grew, the information started to slip away like a dream, and eventually, he fully woke up, his mind a mess.

Glancing outside the carriage, he saw the sun hanging lower in the sky. He must have been asleep longer than he realized.



“William,” Aaron’s voice was rough, betraying the nausea that clung to him. The hangover was really hitting him now.

Just how much had he drunk?

“Ugh... how much longer until we arrive?”

“Only a few more minutes,” William replied, his tone as crisp as ever. “Did you have a restful nap?”

“As restful as one could have in this situation.”

A flicker of sympathy crossed William’s face before he continued, “The sun will set soon, and dinner will be ready once we arrive. They’ve prepared your favorite—steak, medium-rare, with warm bread on the side.

“Who prepared it?” Aaron asked, his curiosity piqued.

“The maids,” William replied. “Would you like to speak with them?”

Without waiting for Aaron’s response, William handed him a small, shiny tablet with an intricate hourglass insignia etched on it. A diamond-like crystal protruded from its center.

“What is this?” Aaron turned the tablet over in his hand, but there were no buttons, no apparent way to interact with it.

“It’s a communication device,” William explained. “Just touch the crystal, speak, and it will handle the rest.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow, intrigued. Magical phones? Now that was something new. But he didn’t linger on it. “Interesting,” he muttered, tapping the crystal to activate the device.

“Is anyone there?” he asked quickly. The moment stretched, the only sound the rustling of trees outside the carriage window. Had he not spoken loud enough? Should he try again? Before he could, a clear voice broke the silence.

“Hello, Master Aaron. My name is Emma. How can I assist you?”

The voice, unmistakably feminine, came through with surprising clarity. There was no static nor background noise. It felt almost as though she was sitting there with him.

“I heard you’re preparing my dinner today,” he replied.

“We’ll have it ready soon.”

“Please pass my thanks to the chef. I’m sure it will be superb.”

“Y-yes,” she replied. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

“Can I ask what’s on the menu?” Aaron asked eagerly. “William mentioned steak, but are there more options?”

“We’ve prepared the usual for you,” Emma replied. “A medium-rare steak with sourdough bread, accompanied by wine.”

“Wine?” Aaron scratched his head, caught off guard by the unexpected addition. “Is that normal? Do I always drink wine with dinner?”

“If you’d prefer something else, I can prepare it,” Emma said, her tone polite. “We’re also happy to adjust the food if you’d like.”



Aaron considered for a moment before shrugging. “Keep the steak and bread. The wine will be fine. Thank you, Emma.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Emma said.

With a flick of his wrist, Aaron tossed the tablet to William, who caught it effortlessly without a glance. The butler tucked it away, his gaze never straying from the road ahead. Aaron was surprised by the older man’s dexterity, especially considering his age, but his attention soon shifted to the grand mansion looming in the distance. As the carriage crept forward, the towering structure exuded an air of majesty, its castle-like walls and commanding height perched atop a hill that overlooked the rest of the town of Trost.

Aaron was thoroughly impressed as the metal gates swung open and the sight of the lush field of flowers stretched before him. The maid who accompanied him into the manor seemed to sense his surprise and only smiled in response.

She guided him through the winding halls of the grand estate, his belongings trailing behind him without so much as a jostle. Upon reaching the dining room, a younger butler, taller than William, greeted him with a respectful bow.

“Allow me to escort you to your seat,” the butler announced.

Aaron nodded quietly, his thoughts drifting to the strange emptiness of the room. It was large—too large for just a few people. Where was everyone? The silence felt jarring compared to the bustling, noisy atmosphere he was used to. Yet, he settled into the stillness, observing the maids moving gracefully through their duties.

Plates shifted as Aaron settled at the large rectangular table. He ate quietly, savoring the steak and bread, absentmindedly aligning his utensils—a comforting habit he had picked up years ago.

Once he finished, the maids cleared the plates, and Aaron leaned back in his chair, a satisfied smile crossing his face. The steak had been cooked to perfection, the bread toasted to a golden brown. He gave thanks for the meal and the attentive maids who had seen to his every need, eating until only clean bones and a few scraps of bread remained, savoring each bite.

As the maids in attendance bowed deferentially, their bright emblem patches marked one of them as the head maid and the rest as her assistants. Aaron turned to the head maid, who’d introduced herself as Malia, and posed a question lingering on his mind.

“May I ask you something?”

“You may ask whatever you wish,” she replied with a slight bow.

Aaron sat, his gaze steady, fingers curling around the knife at his place setting. He lifted it slowly, presenting it almost ceremoniously as he asked his question, clearly unsettling the maid.

“Tell me, what are your goals?”



The head maid hesitated, unsure of how her answer might reflect on her position in the household. "I want to pay off my family's debts," she said, her voice steadying.

"Is that all?" Aaron followed-up.

The room fell into an uneasy silence. The maid recoiled, tensely interpreting his words. She bowed deeper, panic creeping into her movements.

But Aaron's next words were softer, more probing. "My apologies. What I meant was, do you have any dreams?" he sighed, watching her carefully.

"Well... yes," she coyly admitted. "I've always loved making clothes... Someday, I'd like to start a shop in Tenebris."

Aaron's interest piqued, he probed further. "What would you do if I gave you enough funds to start your own shop? Do you think you would do a good job?"

Malia hesitated. "I would try my best."

Aaron's gaze sharpened. "And what if you fail? Not everything works out as planned."

Her answer came quickly. "Then I'll try again. Until it works."

Aaron's lips twitched slightly, intrigued. "And once it does, what then?"

"I'll keep going," she said, her eyes steady. "There's always room to improve."

Aaron studied her for a moment, then exhaled a quiet chuckle. "A tireless student. I can respect that." He lifted the knife, turning it in his hand like a rare gem catching the light. "I once had that same hunger. But lately, I wonder if I've dulled. Perhaps I've grown complacent."

His fingers brushed the hilt, tracing the edge with care, but there was a tension in his grip, a subtle nervousness that contradicted the familiarity he had with the tool.

"It's curious, isn't it?" he said, his eyes fixed on the blade. "Such a simple tool, yet it holds the power to end a life. I've held one countless times, and yet now my hand shakes as though it's the first. The knowledge is there... but my body resists. So I ask you, do you understand why that is?"

With a practiced flick of his wrist, Aaron slammed the knife onto the table, its sharp edge plunging deep into the laminated wood. The head maid recoiled, discomfort etched on her face as she bore witness to the sheer speed and precision with which he moved.

Her answer came forth with a quiet voice as she mustered the courage to speak. "You... have not been trained in the ways of the family household. Perhaps that is why you face this difficulty."

Really?

Had his family neglected him?

He pondered her words carefully, but what she said next clarified everything. "But it was upon your request. You did not want to participate. You were occupied with drinking and clowning and... other things."



The truth struck Aaron with the force of a slap, and he realized just how dismal this life was. Irritation simmered beneath the surface, threatening to spill over. But, to his own surprise, he burst into laughter instead.

"Alright, alright," he said, standing up and returning his chair to its place. "I'll be taking my leave now, but this talk has been... enlightening..."

As he turned to go, a thought struck him, and he called over his shoulder, "Come, Malia, show me to my quarters. I'll see you're properly rewarded for your honesty."

Malia looked hesitantly to the other maids behind her before complying, "If you insist, Master Aaron."

As she led him through the labyrinth of corridors, Aaron observed the blend of architectural styles that defined the mansion. A fusion of Asian and European influences appeared to define them, every corner unveiling a new visual delight reminiscent of a modern architectural exhibit. It was a collaboration between Shanghai and Italy on an extravagant scale.

After a few minutes, she stopped in front of a door and opened it for him. Inside, Aaron found a spacious bedroom, its shelves lined with liquor bottles but little else. Despite the abundance of alcohol, the room had a minimalist feel, tidy yet sparse. A bed sat in the center, but Aaron couldn't shake the sense that it wasn't a place anyone actually spent much time.

"Is this really my—" Aaron returned his gaze to the maid who had guided him here, only to find her undressing right in front of him.

"Woah, woah, what are you doing?"

"Oh, I apologize!" she squirmed as she worked to put back on her dress. "Of course you would want to do it yourself..."

"That's not—" Aaron looked away, embarrassed by the situation. "I think you've misunderstood why I asked you here."

"Is this not usually what you summon my younger maids to your quarters for?" she spoke, a light relief lacing her words.

"God damn it..." he muttered under his breath, putting his hand to his face as he realized the weight of her earlier statements.

Is this really what he spent all his time doing?

"I just want to ask you a few more questions," Aaron said. "But this stays between us. My memory hasn't been the best lately, and I need to be sure of a few things."

"Of course," she replied, "Whatever you wish to know."

As Malia redressed herself, Aaron looked for a nearby chair to pull over and sat down.

"So, Malia," Aaron started over. "What do you know about this world?"

"Hm?" she tilted her head, unsure of how to answer the question. "Not to misunderstand again, but what exactly do you mean by that?"



Aaron rethought his approach, understanding the sudden strangeness of the inquiry.

"Tell me, to whom does your family owe money?"

"A lord who runs one of the trading businesses here in Trost," she explained.

Aaron noticed her eyes flicker away as she paused to continue.

"When we had to flee the Second Kingdom, he helped safeguard our journey across the desert," she elaborated. "We would not have survived without him."

"Any reason you had to leave?" Aaron inquired, her hesitance piquing his interest.

"I'd... rather not discuss that, if I may."

"Touchy subject?"

She nodded lightly.

"That's fine," he refrained away from the topic. "Then, how many kingdoms are there?"

"I'm not sure I understand the meaning behind this question..." she faltered, somewhat confounded.

"It's as straightforward as it sounds," he encouraged. "I just want to make sure we're on the same page here."

"Well, if that's the case..." she began, "there are three. The Third Kingdom is where we are now, and two more lie to the east of the Mirage Desert."

"Do you have a map I could look at?"

"I don't mean to question your intent," she said, "but if your interests lie in such things, the library might better suit your needs."

A library?

Surprised, he thought to ask further, but he paused, reconsidering. "I see. Fair enough, then. Would you show me to the library in the morning?"

"Of course." She nodded. "That can be arranged."

"Then leave me for now," Aaron said.

"I'll make sure to come at an appropriate time tomorrow."



CHAPTER TWO

Beyond the towering clouds, deep within the verdant woods, and atop the majestic peaks, there lie kingdoms of wonder, waiting to be uncovered and explored by the daring and the curious.

— The Adventurers Guild, *A Call to Adventure*

Malia departed as they arrived before a set of wide open doors inside the Aevum Estate, leaving Aaron standing before the grand entrance of the Aevum Library.

The name glinted like a beacon above the arched doors as the first rays of dawn peeked through the windows, daring him to enter a new world. Since his arrival, he'd been thinking about what steps to take next, and like any smart planner, he knew that gathering information was always the crucial first move. What was a good plan without information, after all? For an assassin, information was like pure gold.

From beyond the gates, a faint murmur echoed as if the very walls of the library whispered of the wonders within.

Aaron stepped over the threshold; his cautious footsteps echoed against the gleaming marble floors. Despite the trepidation pulsating in his heart, a hunger for knowledge propelled him forward.

The room sprawled magnificently, breathtaking in its sheer grandeur. This library rivaled some of the ones he'd seen back on Earth. He recalled a mission in America he had partaken involving a particularly large library. Unluckily, he'd damaged some of the books there. He would try to avoid repeating that mistake here.

Looking around, golden accents caught the morning light, casting a warm glow across the opulent oak surroundings. Towering shelves reached toward the sky, their immense structure reflecting the space's majesty. The rich crimson decor exuded warmth, perfectly complementing the golden hues of the early sun.

“Oh? Fancy seeing you here,” a voice, soft and graceful, filled the air, prompting Aaron to turn toward its source. “Welcome to my library.”

Before him stood a tall female figure, radiating a gentle peaches-and-cream essence. Her soft-gold eyes held a tranquil, observant gaze. But her hair was what drew his attention most—luminous and metallic, akin to refined quicksilver, flowing down her back in long, sleek strands. Her complexion contributed to her general elegance and allure, amplifying her already refined presence. The sharp features only added to the overall impression.

Yet Aaron couldn’t shake the feeling that her serene exterior might be hiding something more beneath.

“Why do you look at me like that?” Aaron asked suddenly, sensing a faint undercurrent of disdain from her eyes. He was particularly good at reading people, and while she was a bit harder to decipher, he could tell something was off.

They didn’t seem to see eye to eye. He wasn’t sure on what, but he could feel it.

“What do you mean?” she replied innocently, but a slight crease on her forehead betrayed her genuine emotions.

“I can see it in your eyes,” Aaron stated with certainty, narrowing his eyesight as he scrutinized her expression. “I’ve seen that look before.”

“You’re overthinking it,” she replied with a soft chuckle, her tone light. “It’s just that you look a bit... disheveled,” she added, gesturing to his worn, stained clothes. “But what brings you to my library? You’re not exactly the type to frequent here.”

Her voice was mesmerizing, a gentle melody that caught Aaron’s attention and held it.

“Beautiful,” he muttered, almost to himself.

“Sorry?” she asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“This place,” he quickly corrected, trying to cover up his slip of the tongue. “It’s only gotten better since the last time I visited.” He paused, unsure if he’d been convincing. “Anyway, I’ve come to read from your collection. Hope you don’t mind if I spend some time here today.”

Her reaction caught him off guard. Though she tried to conceal it, he sensed the confusion beneath her composed exterior. For a brief moment, her lips remained pressed together, perhaps weighing whether to admit him or show him the door. It was clear this wasn’t something the old Aaron did often.

“Well, may I enter?” Aaron pressed, giving into a slight inclination to bow.

After a brief pause, the woman before him relented, her expression softening as she gestured gracefully with a sweep of her arm. “I won’t stop you, but try your best not to make a mess, if you can help it. Clean up after you’re finished.”

“Of course.”

Stepping farther inside, the room seemed to come alive. Sunbeams filtered through the numerous windows, casting an ethereal glow over the woman’s hair. She moved toward a nearby couch and shielded her face from the light with a

book, her attention quickly consumed by its pages. Fully engrossed, she dismissed him once more, returning to her reading.

Aaron navigated the opulent library, admiring the plush crimson carpets and intricate bookshelves. Scholars, engrossed in their studies, gave only fleeting glances, acknowledging him with polite nods or brief salutations. Some lounged on luxurious sofas while others whispered quietly among themselves.

Most strikingly, however, in the center of the space, whirled an enormous magical sphere.

Suspended in midair, the sphere was encircled by whirling rings and surrounded by floating shards of molded iron. It seemed to bend the very fabric of space and gravity around it. Its brilliance was nearly blinding, causing the room to shift in response—walls and floors projected outward like a mesmerizing kaleidoscope.

Despite the diversion of gravity, floating chandeliers still hung defiantly from the ceiling. The bookshelves, tables, and chairs on the upper roof turned in adamant denial of physics, and scholars paced around on the second floor as if it were nothing out of the ordinary.

A part of him wanted to stay around and admire the structure, but another part of him knew that he needed to see beyond the first floor.

When Aaron ascended the spiral staircase to the second floor, his stomach churned. It wasn't him that was inverted, but rather it was the world around him that had turned upside down. He couldn't quite place the feeling, but the very force of gravity seemed transposed. Below him, scholars on the first floor hung suspended, their postures turned upside-down. Aaron took a few careful steps, unease settling in as he adjusted to his shifting balance.

"Well, that's interesting," Aaron clutched his stomach, leaning on the balcony. He tapped his foot, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Though he tensed, expecting to fall, his balance remained unnervingly steady.

As Aaron navigated the inverted library, his eyes darted from shelf to shelf, seeking something useful. The rows of books offered a mix of familiar and foreign subjects. He found it interesting that the books on religion, although detailed and organized, occupied a small, tucked-away corner, as though deliberately removed from the rest of the collection.

Aaron shrugged off the thought, his attention drawn instead to the volumes on history and geography. As he perused their titles and picked some out from the bookshelves, scholars in white tunics bustled around him carrying scrolls and books, their robes marked with the emblem of an hourglass.

One scholar approached Aaron and inquired, "Would you like any assistance?"

Aaron noticed the colorful vials fastened to the scholar's waist.

"I could use some help carrying these books to the first floor," he accepted.



"We can attend to that matter," the scholar replied with a whistle, summoning a glowing orb of light that floated above him. The other scholars, noticing, wordlessly began sorting the books he requested into piles, preparing to carry them down the spiral staircase. But a few of them opted instead to defy the defiance of gravity, levitating several feet off the ground before gently turning around in mid-air and descending to the first floor. Aaron raised an eyebrow.

Levitation?

"It's been a while since you last visited us," the scholar remarked.

"Better late than never," Aaron replied.

"I'm glad to see you showing an interest in intellectual pursuits. The Aevum Astrala takes pride in serving the noble son of the House of Aevum."

"Well, you certainly have a way with words," Aaron said.

The scholar bowed humbly. "Words are the bridge between worlds. Here, the books hold a wealth of knowledge, gathered from every corner of Ralador."

"And what of our own history? Can you tell me about that?" Aaron inquired.

"Hmm..." The scholar's expression shifted, his tone becoming more guarded. "Your sister, Sylvia, could offer far more insight than I. Much of your family's legacy is kept private."

"You can't tell me anything at all?" Aaron pressed.

The scholar shook his head. "As a precaution, you should know the most."

"Right," Aaron replied, his tone curt.



Aaron reclined on the plush davenport, a towering stack of books surrounding him. He'd amassed quite a collection. The spines ranged from well-worn classics to obscure texts, a good mix of entertainment and knowledge. He intended to devour them all that day, and with his eidetic memory, honed over years of training, it wouldn't be hard. The real question, though, was whether he wanted to spend the whole day reading or not. It wasn't his choice of activity, but with no better plan, why not?

Diving in, the first book that caught his attention, *The Founding of the Four Great Houses*, proved to be a good introduction to his understanding of this world's politics.

The four Great Houses: Torelli, Exoren, Dahnari, and Aevum.

Understanding the dynamics of a situation was the first step toward mastering it, and upon further reading, he learned that his family held considerable power, an interesting position for him to be in. He was used to being at the bottom of the chain, scrabbling for scraps and fighting to survive, but perhaps this new life wouldn't be so bad after all.



Continuing to read, it became clear that the four Great Houses each had their own roles to play in the Human Empire, which itself consisted of the three kingdoms. “Human,” he mused. Did that imply the existence of other races, or was it simply a term to unite all of humanity?

He quickly pieced together a rough history of each kingdom.

‘The First Kingdom,’ his finger traced across the page. King Mirakhil Torelli was credited with founding Yakiri, the Kingdom of Science, which became renowned for its innovations in the practical sciences. Aaron found it reminiscent of Germany in a way.

The Second Kingdom’s rise was spurred by conflict with other species, a fact that surprised Aaron more than the kingdom’s very founding. Named Gatam, the Kingdom of War, a significant battle ending the war seemed to have truly started the kingdom, though the specifics remained vague. This war led to the emergence of several noble houses, with House Dahnari initially standing out as the chief supplier of weapons vital for the empire’s defense and House Exoren’s using slaves to construct the kingdom’s walls.

Slavery here wasn’t surprising to Aaron, but it was still a little bit disappointing.

The Third Kingdom, Asteria, the Kingdom of Magic, struck Aaron as the most substantial of the three. Just a century ago, the empire fully embraced magic as more and more people pushed past the vast Mirage Desert and beyond the empire’s former reach. Aaron’s family, House Aevum, had been at the forefront of this movement, adapting quickly and establishing themselves as one of the first and most successful families to thrive in this new, magical era.

“The Aevum paved the foundation for the empire’s future,” the book read.

Aaron paused, reflecting. “I see...”

He let the words settle. Things were starting to fall into place. Honestly, for how prestigious they were, Aaron couldn’t fault his family for considering exile. If he were in their shoes, a son like him would hardly be an asset, short-term or long. The lingering question, though, was whether there was any way for him to change his course—to shift the direction he was heading.

He had several questions, but his primary interest was the subject of magic itself. It appeared to be the prevailing force now shaping the world, and the idea of mastering it occupied his thoughts more than he was willing to acknowledge.

However, as he dove into his next book, *Mastrov’s Primer on Magical Anatomy*, he sensed someone watching him from the corner of his eye.

“You seem different today,” Sylvia observed, her silken robes rustling as she drew near. Her piercing gaze bore into him, and Aaron shifted uncomfortably.

“How so?” he asked, trying to hide his unease.

“Your eyes are clear,” she replied jokingly, her voice low and measured. Aaron met her gaze for a moment. The intensity behind them was imposing, but it was nothing he wasn’t familiar with.

“Well, I’d hope so,” Aaron replied, “It helps to see what I’m reading.”



“Very funny,” Sylvia said, rolling her eyes. “Nevertheless, I’m relieved to see you’re not under the influence of any... questionable substances today.” She exhaled, her tone softening. “I miss having my younger brother around, you know. Especially when everyone else is tangled up in their own affairs.”

Aaron smirked. “Do you, now?”

“Well, I kid, but there’s some truth to it,” she said with a coy tilt of her head. “Excessive as your prattling is, I still can’t help but enjoy your company.”

“How generous of you.” He turned a page in his book, his expression unreadable. “In that case, I’ll make it an effort to prattle less.”

Sylvia folded her arms. “Oh?” Her voice carried a note of amusement. “No sharp retort this time? No exaggerated sigh of defiance?”

Aaron glanced up. “Hm?”

She leaned in slightly, studying him. “Typically, you’re quite vocal when given criticism.”

He hummed in thought before closing the book. “Perhaps I’m learning restraint.”

Sylvia scoffed. “Now that would be a first.”

“Well, to be honest... my memories have been a bit hazy lately,” Aaron admitted, rubbing his temple. “I forget things I shouldn’t, and though the details are unclear, I feel as if I recall things that don’t seem tied to my past.”

Sylvia raised an eyebrow. “Is that the excuse this time? How hazy are we talking?”

Aaron hesitated, exhaling slowly. “Pretty much everything. I think I might have a case of amnesia.”

She blinked. “Amnesia?” Her head tilted. “Your jokes don’t usually go that far.”

“I’m serious this time.”

“You don’t remember anything at all?”

“Some bits and pieces,” he said, waving a hand vaguely. “The important things, I guess. I can still remember a bit about you, just... not really.”

Sylvia scoffed. “Comforting. Are you sure this isn’t one of your pranks again?”

“I wish.” Aaron smirked.

“Fascinating.” She skeptically studied him for a moment, her eyes narrowing. “And yet you’re inclined to share this with me?”

He shrugged. “I’m not too sure. It just feels... instinctive, somehow.”

Sylvia leaned back, crossing her arms. “Instinct, huh? That’s either very touching or deeply concerning.”

Aaron chuckled. “I suppose that depends on how much you trust me.”

“Not nearly enough to take that as reassurance.” She nodded, the fabric of her robes shifting with the movement. Then, after a beat, her expression softened. “But... it’ll clear up. I’m sure of it.”

Aaron frowned. “And how can you be so sure?”



Sylvia let out a short breath, crossing her arms. "Experience," she admitted. "I've had my fair share of reckless nights. Give it a few days. You'll feel normal again."

He hesitated, then decided to speak. "That's not what I meant." His fingers drummed against his sleeve. "I've been having these dreams. They feel so vivid in the moment, so real that they mess with my sense of perception of memory, but when I try to focus on them, I find that their details escape me."

Sylvia's brows lifted slightly. "That does sound unsettling." She tilted her head, a glint of curiosity in her eyes. "Are you asking for my expertise, then?"

"Maybe." Aaron gave a small nod.

She began pacing, her robe trailing behind her as she mulled it over. "Dreams tangling with memories..." she murmured. "I can't say I've ever come across that before."

Then, with a decisive shake of her head, she added, "But I still say it's the drinking. Give it time, and it'll pass."

Aaron huffed a quiet laugh. "You really do blame everything on drinking, don't you?"

"I simply follow the most likely explanation," Sylvia countered smoothly. "And considering how much you've been drinking lately, I'd say your brain is finally protesting."

Aaron looked up. "And if it doesn't subside in a few days?"

Sylvia tapped a finger against her arm, considering. "Then we'll cross that bridge when we get there. Who knows? It might even turn out to be a good thing." She gave him a pointed look. "Until then, patience and observation."

Aaron fell quiet for a moment, as if debating something. Then, with a casual air that didn't quite match the weight of his words, he said, "One of the librarians mentioned you were the one to ask about our family history. I was wondering if you could enlighten me."

Sylvia's expression shifted, her eyes narrowing just slightly at the sudden request. Aaron caught the change but said nothing, waiting. "Why the sudden interest?" she asked.

He shrugged, feigning nonchalance. "Exile gives a man time to think. Lately, I find myself wanting to know more about... a lot of things."

Sylvia studied him for a moment longer before exhaling. "I see." She scoffed but eventually relented. "I suppose that makes sense. It's not every day a trickster like you shows a genuine desire for knowledge." A wry smile tugged at her lips. "Just don't get your hopes up too high. The rest of the family still finds you rather... unsettling."

Aaron smirked. "It is what it is. Can't change the past." He tilted his head slightly. "But who knows? Maybe I'll surprise you one day."

Sylvia arched a skeptical brow. "Oh? And how exactly do you plan to do that?"



He grinned. "That would ruin the surprise, wouldn't it?"

She hummed, unconvinced. "I'll believe it when I see it."

Aaron shrugged. "Fair enough." Then, after a beat, his tone shifted. "First, though, I genuinely am curious about our family's history."

Without warning, Sylvia leaned in and flicked him on the forehead. Aaron flinched, more surprised by her sudden proximity than the flick itself. "There's something different about you," she mused, her voice filled with a bit of curiosity.

"I searched around and couldn't find anything substantial on the subject," he said, eager to steer the conversation back on course. "Any reason for that?"

Sylvia nodded. "Come sit with me."

She led him to a spacious table where he settled onto one of the couches without a sound. Sylvia took the opposite seat, lounging back with the ease of someone who had all the time in the world, though her sharp gaze never left him.

"You've never been interested in this sort of thing before," Sylvia said, studying him. "I could get you a book on our history in a few days, but not right now."

Aaron leaned in slightly. "Do we not have books on it?"

"Not ones available to the public, no." She crossed one leg over the other. "There are certain... secrets tied to them. Not hidden from you, of course, but Father would have to be consulted before we dig too deep." She tilted her head. "Still, it's good to see you taking an interest again."

Aaron exhaled, resting his arms on the table. "Figured it wouldn't hurt to learn a little before I lose the opportunity." If he was going to be stuck in this world, he might as well understand his place in it.

Sylvia's expression turned unreadable. "Are you hoping to escape your exile?"

He met her gaze evenly. "Do you think it's possible?"

Sylvia hummed, tapping a finger idly against the armrest. "I'm not the person to ask about that. You'd have to consult Father."

"Guess it wouldn't hurt to know more about him before that time comes," Aaron said. "Is there any way I can learn about our history now?"

Sylvia tapped a finger against her chin, considering. "I could show you. But don't expect anything beyond the basics—just what's available to the public."

Aaron raised a brow. "Didn't you say there wasn't anything the public had access to?"

She smirked. "We can't hide *everything* from the world." Leaning back, she gestured toward the open space around them. "So, let's start with what's already known."

With a sharp snap of her fingers, the room ignited with golden light. Aaron instinctively tensed, his eyes darting around for the source and finally landing on the massive orb behind him. Its metallic rings whirled to life, spinning faster and faster, the glow intensifying with each rotation.

"The Aeviternum," Sylvia said, her voice steady and thoughtful. "Before you ask, yes, there are only a few of these in the world, and we're fortunate enough



to have them all. It's hard to believe Mother doesn't acknowledge it as her finest creation."

Aaron's confusion deepened as her words seemed to echo throughout the space. Suddenly, the room around them began to vanish—walls and furniture melted away, leaving only an empty void. Metallic lines appeared, glowing faintly with a strange, almost haunting light that sent a shiver down Aaron's spine. Despite the brightness, there was something unnerving in the air.

"You wanted to learn about our history?" Sylvia's voice rang clear in the silence. "Then let's watch the memories of our ancestors."

With a clap of her hands, the air ignited with arcane runes, intricate circles of magic pulsing with otherworldly energy. The glowing sigils wove themselves into the walls and floor, etching patterns that seemed to shimmer between reality and something beyond.

The space around Aaron twisted, folding in on itself like ripples in a pond. In an instant, the chamber was gone, replaced by a vast, sunlit plain. Rolling grasslands stretched endlessly before him, and winding rivers glistened under the sun's golden light. The scent of earth and wildflowers filled the air.

Aaron hesitated before stepping forward, half-expecting the illusion to break underfoot. But the ground was solid. The breeze was real, cool against his skin. The warmth of the sun felt no different than it had moments ago.

Sylvia spread her arms, her expression unreadable. "The Eredal Plains," she said, her voice tinged with something between reverence and nostalgia. "As they were nearly a century ago."

Aaron's mind raced. Was this an illusion? No—his senses told him otherwise. If this was mere trickery, it was flawless. Sylvia glanced at him, as if reading his thoughts. "This is a projection of our ancestors' memories," she explained, "Through the Aeviternum, we aren't just watching history—we're experiencing it."

"Fascinating," Aaron exhaled slowly, taking in the endless stretch of grasslands. "Hard to believe this is what they saw, the land they walked."

Sylvia studied the horizon, her expression unreadable. "Some tales of history paint them as brigands. Convenient, isn't it?" She let the words hang before shaking her head. "But they weren't thieves, not really in that sense. They were explorers, mercenaries—people who didn't wait for permission to claim what the world refused to give them."

Aaron's gaze flicked toward her. "And they built all this," he murmured. She nodded. "Not without effort."

"Figured as much," Aaron muttered. The weight of the estate, the city, their name, it all carried the echoes of struggle. Nothing that lasted was ever won cleanly.

Sylvia smirked, folding her arms. "The other houses weren't exactly welcoming. Power unsettles people." Her eyes glinted. "But here, we stopped



asking for permission,” she tapped a finger against her arm. “In Asteria, although the king may wear the crown, he isn’t the only one holding the reins.”

With a snap of Sylvia’s fingers, the world shifted. Stone walls rose from nothing, stretching high into the sky. Buildings took form, brick by brick, as if the past were unfolding before their eyes. “Look,” Sylvia gestured outward. “The earliest days of Trost.”

Aaron turned, his senses assaulted by the sheer vibrancy of the scene. Farmers hunched over rows of crops, their hands caked in soil. Blacksmiths hammered away at glowing metal, sparks flying as they shaped tools and weapons. Wagons groaned under the weight of goods, their drivers barking orders to clear the way.

The air was thick with the mingling scents of fresh earth, sweat, and roasting meat. The hum of voices layered over the rhythmic clang of steel, the distant crackle of open fires, the rush of footsteps on uneven streets. His gaze swept across it all.

“Trost wasn’t always the city you know. It started like this—raw, uncertain. Our ancestors carved it from dust and ambition, brick by brick, deal by deal.” She folded her arms. “And we’re still building on what they left behind.”

Aaron folded his arms, watching the city unfold around him. “So how did we go so long unopposed?”

Sylvia’s gaze lingered on the streets, where spectral figures bustled about, carrying bricks, tending to market stalls, weaving the fabric of early civilization. “Opportunity,” she simply said. “We were among the first to leave the old kingdoms and develop magical techniques—despite the empire’s ban on magic. That gave us an edge. We built, we defended, we thrived. People feared us, and they respected us.”

Aaron’s brow furrowed. “And yet, we never claimed the throne.”

Sylvia smirked. “You think we should have?”

“Seems like the logical step. If we had that much power, why settle for anything less?”

She let the question hang for a moment before gesturing with a flick of her wrist. The city shifted again—great banners unfurled from rooftops, bearing a symbol of wispy wings. A lone figure appeared in the distance, his stance unwavering, his silhouette towering over a gathered crowd. “The throne already had its ruler,” Sylvia said. “Tenik Fiari. A man who clawed his way from nothing to become the first King of Asteria. He wielded magic when it was still forbidden, he built a kingdom of his own strong enough to challenge the empire itself, and when he forced their hand, when he made them bend, we stood beside him.”

Aaron exhaled slowly, watching the ghostly image of the king address his people. “So we traded the crown for influence.”

“You don’t understand,” Sylvia said, her tone was certain. “Some figures are simply too strong to be swayed. He united those who the empire previously abandoned, and that kind of influence is stronger than any.” A ghost of a smile



flickered across her lips. “Not that we ever needed the throne. We helped shape it from the shadows.”

Aaron watched her, his thoughts drifting. The way she spoke of Tenik Fiairi—his unshakable will, his relentless pursuit of something greater—struck a chord. It felt familiar, though not in a way he cared to remember. He had never been one that shaped the world, only ever the blade in another’s hand. He hadn’t sought power or purpose; they had been decided for him. In the end, he simply followed the path laid before him, whether he wanted to or not.

“That’s enough for today,” Sylvia said, snapping her fingers. The illusion unraveled in an instant, Trost’s towering walls and bustling streets dissolving into the void-like emptiness of the chamber. “I’ll have those books for you in a few days, if you’re still interested.”

Aaron exhaled, still adjusting to the sudden shift. “And if I want to see more before then?”

Sylvia smirked. “I won’t stop you. But unlike you, I have other responsibilities.”

He huffed a quiet laugh. “Fair enough. I’ve got things to handle too.”

“Good.” She turned to leave but hesitated. “Just make sure you’re at the family dinner tonight.”

Aaron arched a brow. “Family dinner?”

“Father doesn’t want you showing up late again,” she said, folding her arms. “You know how he was last year.”

Aaron rolled his shoulders, suppressing a sigh. “Right. I’ll be there.”

Sylvia’s fingers shimmered with lingering magic as the illusion unraveled, fading like mist in the morning sun. The library settled around them once more—the scent of aged parchment, the quiet murmur of scholars, and the steady hum of the floating orb, its glow dimming as it spun to a slow, rhythmic turn.

“What will you do until then?” she asked.

Aaron leaned against a nearby desk, considering. “Probably finish reading.”

Sylvia smiled. “You’re welcome to stay as long as you like. It’d be a good time to catch up on those family lessons you’ve conveniently ignored.”

He raised a brow. “How many am I behind on?”

She tilted her head, feigning thought. “Let’s see... nearly all of them.”

Aaron exhaled, rubbing his temples. “Of course. Why did I even ask?”



CHAPTER THREE

Everyone casts a shadow. My shadow looms over the entire city.

— The Unseen Moon

The table buzzed with an unusual liveliness as Sylvia idly picked at her half-eaten plate, her gaze drifting over the steak, eggs, wheat bread, and soup before her. It was an unremarkable meal at a glance, but the meat caught her attention. She speared a piece with her fork, lifting it to the light and scrutinizing the marbling. With a turn of her wrist, she rotated the steak. It was clearly a cut above the usual fare.

“Did we change suppliers?” Sylvia asked, her gaze shifting around the room. Her family, gathered at the grand dining table, fell into a brief hush at her words. Her father, as always, commanded the bulk of the attention at one end, while her mother held court at the other. Between them, her siblings spoke in quieter tones, their conversations filling the gaps.

Eric, the brawniest and most boisterous of her brothers, was the first to break the silence. “Yeah, we did,” he grunted, his voice deep and rugged as he swiped another hearty bite of his meal. “You like it?”

Sylvia scrutinized the meat on her plate, still turning it thoughtfully. “The quality’s nice,” she said, pausing, her brow furrowing slightly. “But why the switch? Anyone care to explain?”

Eric, still chewing, shrugged with casual confidence. “Well, we secured a promising trade deal. Figured we deserved a little treat.” His grin grew wider, though Sylvia could tell it was more pride than mischief.

Sylvia’s gaze shifted to their father, who sat quiet and distant, his thoughts unreadable as always. His single nod, silent and unyielding, carried more weight than any words could. Sylvia knew better than to press further. His very presence demanded respect, and caution often followed in its wake. With a resigned sigh, she turned back to her plate.

Some decisions were simply beyond her reach.

"Very well, I will note that down in our records," she lamented, returning to her food.

Her disappointment lingered in the air as she absentmindedly twirled her utensils. To her, the funds spent on enhancing their meals could've been better used elsewhere, such as expanding their influence or strengthening their alliances. Those kinds of operations seemed more vital to her.

"Did we get any new cooks?" a soft voice asked from beside her. Sylvia's younger sister, her cheeks round and silver hair neatly pulled into an updo, leaned in to examine her steak with curiosity.

"A keen eye you've got there," Eric smiled.

"It's really good!" the girl chirped, practically bouncing in her seat.

"Glad to hear that," Eric grinned, clearly pleased with the praise.

But as they savored the succulent meal, another female voice chimed in, much bolder, "If we're making improvements, the training grounds could use a repair."

Irene slouched in her chair, clearly unenthused by the present conversation. She was the most formidable of the sisters, with visible scars adorning her arms and her black, messy lob complimenting her sharp facial features.

"Point taken," Eric said, gesturing with his fork. "They have been getting a little battered."

"Hmm," Sylvia mused. "It's mostly just you two who make use of them though."

"As far as I'm concerned, two is enough to justify it," Eric replied.

Sylvia nodded. "I don't disagree, but I believe we have higher priorities on the horizon."

"Then I have a proposition," Eric began with a knowing smile. "Let's get Aaron involved more in training." With a flourish, he extended his hand in Aaron's direction, capturing everyone's attention.

Aaron, taken off guard, looked up from his plate. His fork hovered in mid-air as he suddenly found himself the center of attention. Sylvia was slightly surprised he'd actually shown up, and she'd been even more surprised with how quietly he'd been enjoying his meal. But now, with everyone's eyes on him, it seemed he couldn't remain in the background anymore.

"I'm not going to start cleaning up after you guys," he replied.

Eric chuckled, waving him off. "No, not that. Just use the grounds more often. That way Sylvia won't get all worked up every time we ask to repair it."

"I can hear you, Eric," Sylvia shot him a sharp look.

It wasn't that she ignored the state of the training grounds, it was just that their loud, chaotic sparring sessions almost always left it destroyed. They'd patched it up here and there at least a dozen times over the last few months, but Sylvia didn't see much point in a complete restoration knowing that it would be ruined again after just one fight.



Eric smiled playfully. "Lighten up, Sylvia."

"Sylvia *loves* to harp at us for ruining the training grounds, yet she holds the purse strings," Irene grumbled. "Shouldn't you be funding our family's training better?"

"Shouldn't *you* be off sailing the Archipelago or something?" Sylvia remarked. "Until a few months ago, those training grounds were pristine."

"That doesn't mean things shouldn't be prepared for when I return."

Sylvia cleared her throat, her eyes narrowing slightly. "There are more important areas to focus on than just the training grounds."

Irene raised an eyebrow, her expression skeptical. "Like what? Are you saying our training doesn't matter?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Sylvia replied evenly, "I'm suggesting we allocate our resources more wisely. Perhaps strengthening our information network or improving our intel-gathering capabilities."

Irene's lip curled. "You mean sneaking around like vermin?"

Sylvia's gaze sharpened, her voice cold but controlled. "No. I mean controlling the flow of information—that's what we've always done."

Irene's brow arched, amusement flickering in her eyes. "In my opinion, there are much easier ways of extracting information."

Sylvia's tone turned cold, "Is that all you're capable of? Resorting to violence?"

"Whatever it takes to get results," she shrugged. "Do you think that we're better off playing nice and pretending that diplomacy will solve everything?"

Sylvia met her gaze head-on, unflinching. "Diplomacy cultivates civilization." Her voice lowered, growing more measured, yet still sharp. "We control more than just fear."

"Oh, spare me your ideals," Irene scoffed, crossing her arms. "How do you think the empire was born? Even the Torellis knew that if you want results, sometimes you have to get your hands bloodied."

Sylvia's jaw clenched, the slightest twitch in her fingers betraying the simmering frustration beneath her calm exterior. "Yes, an empire that's fractured more than once," she said slowly. "What happens when the blood you spilled causes more bloodshed in the future? What will you do then?"

Irene's golden stare dangerously narrowed, her voice lowering as the challenge hung in the air. "You always speak like there's a perfect answer, like every move can be calculated, but sometimes it just comes down to who's got the bigger sword."

"Typical." Sylvia's gaze sharpened.

Irene leaned forward, her posture brimming with defiance. "What was that?"

The two locked eyes, the tension between them thickening with every passing moment. Sylvia's expression was taut, but she refused to break. Irene's hands clenched into fists, but she held them still, her anger palpable through her countenance.



The quiet at the table grew heavier, as if the very air hummed with the threat of something worse. Sylvia rolled her eyes, a gesture so dismissive it sent a jolt through Irene who shot up from her seat, her chair scraping sharply against the floor.

Just as the tension seemed like it was about to reach a breaking point, a voice rang out—sharp and composed, cutting through the building tension like a blade. Their mother’s voice, calm yet carrying the weight of authority, filled the room.

“Enough,” she said. The air shifted, an icy apprehension settling over them all. “There will be no more bickering at the table. It’s been far too long since we’ve all gathered like this.”

Both sisters froze, their eyes wide with a touch of unease.

“Sylvia, you will apologize to your older sister,” their mother’s voice, calm yet commanding, continued. “And Irene, you will show respect.”

With that, the room grew deathly still. They all knew that while Mother was generally kind, she was equally capable of being merciless when pushed too far.

Irene clicked her tongue, her frustration barely contained.

Sylvia, her gaze silent, caught Irene’s eye, understanding flashing between them in that brief moment. A clear agreement passed between the two, no words necessary.

“Now,” Mother continued, her tone unwavering, “we are gathered here for a reason.”

“Indeed.” Their father’s deep voice cut through the air as he pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. The room stilled, every pair of eyes drawn to him. “Tonight, we mark an occasion our family has honored since the kingdom’s founding. As such, I’m grateful to have all my children here to share in it.”

He rarely spoke at length during meals, but once a year, he always had words to say. The kingdom’s anniversary held a weight of tradition that he dutifully passed down to them, much as it had been passed to him. Though the true date had come and gone days ago, they had delayed their observance of it—waiting until every seat at the table was filled.

When Aaron so blatantly showed disdain for it last year, it came as barely a surprise when his exile was announced for everyone to witness.

“Ninety-nine years ago, the efforts of our ancestors were recognized in the birth of the greatest kingdom that this empire has ever known,” he proclaimed, his voice resonating with pride. “We carry their legacy forward, ensuring that a century from now, our descendants may proudly follow in their footsteps.”

As he sat back down, all eyes remained fixed on him, awaiting his final words.

“Now,” he said as he clasped the glass in front of him and raised it. “Let us pay tribute to them.” On his command, each member of the family took a drink in their hands and similarly raised them to the center of the table.

“From the eyes that see the world,” he spoke, and each person nodded in response.



Then, following his motion, everybody took a drink. Sylvia expected that to be the end of it, but he continued to speak.

"Aaron, I'm glad to see you here," Father proclaimed. "How were your birthday festivities?"

"You know, the usual," he simply answered.

"William has informed me of the... circumstances following it. Are you feeling better?"

Aaron nodded. "Quite. Thank you for your concern."

Sylvia raised an eyebrow at the unexpected exchange. Aaron was infamous for his long-winded, often absurdly detailed stories—particularly the ones laced with his questionable exploits. More often than not, they ended with everyone nursing a headache.

But this time, he was different. His tone was quieter, more measured—nothing like his usual ramblings, the ones he always labored over. Perhaps something really *had* happened to him.

"Long time no see!" Nina exclaimed suddenly, her voice bubbly and full of energy. "Whatcha been up to?"

"I started learning about magic," he said, giving a slight smile.

Nina's face widened immensely at the mention of magic. "Teach me!" she exclaimed, excitement in her voice.

"Want to see something?" Aaron asked.

Nina shook her head fervently.

Aaron flicked his wrist, and a gleaming silver Vinar coin materialized between his fingers. Freshly minted, its polished surface caught the light as he rolled it smoothly across his knuckles. Then, with a subtle twist of his hand, it vanished—only to reappear in his other palm a heartbeat later.

"Whoa!" Nina's eyes went wide with excitement. "That's so cool! Show me how!"

Aaron chuckled. "Watch carefully."

He laid the coin flat on his open palm. With the slightest motion of his fingers, it lifted off his skin, hovering a few centimeters in the air. It spun lazily for a moment before dropping back into his grasp. Then, with a smooth motion, he closed his hand over it. When he opened it again, the coin was gone.

Nina gasped. "No way! Where'd it go?!"

Sylvia observed with mild intrigue as Aaron demonstrated his skill. It wasn't actual magic, but it'd been an impressive blend of sleight of hand and misdirection.

Eric dabbed his mouth with a handkerchief before leaning forward. "What made you finally interested in magic?" he asked. "Didn't seem to matter much to you before."

Aaron took a bite, chewing thoughtfully before replying, "Well, I'm sure you already know the answer."



Eric nodded knowingly. “Ah, yes. I understand,” he said, his eyes scanning the table for a change in topic. But Aaron wasn’t finished.

“But that’s not the only reason,” Aaron said. “I wanted to expand my studies in general. Magic just happens to be my current focus.”

Across the table, Irene smirked. “How’s that going? If you need a hand, I wouldn’t mind giving you a few training sessions before I leave. And if Sylvia finally gets around to fixing the training grounds before then, we could even give it a spar.”

Sylvia shot her a sharp look, but Irene only knowingly smirked.

Adam smoothly cut in, his clear, sharp tone giving a slight air of authority. “You’re welcome to use any family resources,” he told Aaron. “Just run it by Father or me first—not that he’d have any objections.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind,” Aaron replied with a nod.

The conversation died quickly, leaving a bitter taste in the air, and the once lively atmosphere had now turned into one of silence. Aaron’s exile was a matter that hung over the room like a thick fog. Father had always been firm with his punishments, but this one had inarguably been his most severe. It was still a year away, but each day that it ticked closer only made it all the more real—perhaps Aaron was finally coming to realize that.

As Aaron polished off the last morsel on his plate, his eyes drifted to the heavy book resting beside him. He dabbed his mouth with a napkin and stood up, offering a respectful bow. “If you’ll excuse me,” he said, his voice polite.

He picked up the book and left the table, his footsteps echoing softly against the polished stone floor as he stepped into the hallway. The sound of his steps gradually faded into the distance, swallowed by the vast expanse of the estate.

With a gentle gesture, Adam pushed his glasses up and cleared his throat. Instantly, the rest of the family fell silent, each member looking expectantly towards him. Adam scanned the room, his eyes meeting each gaze before he tapped his fingertips lightly against the table’s polished surface.

As he did, a magical circle sprang to life under his hands, glowing with an otherworldly energy. The circle expanded, sending out ripples of mana that spread throughout the dining room, encapsulating it in a transparent barrier. The family members watched, unsurprised, as if they had been expecting Adam to do something like this.

“Well, that was quite the set of events,” Adam exclaimed, his eyes alight with intrigue.

Irene smirked, her curiosity piqued. “You may have a point for once,” she admitted.

Adam gestured towards Sylvia, beckoning her to share her insight. “So, what do you think? Is he compromised?” he inquired.



Sylvia shrugged nonchalantly, her attention focused on her meal. “Not exactly,” she replied, her tone matter-of-fact. “There’s no evidence of tampering with his mind or physical composition.”

Eric interjected, his skepticism evident. “But everyone’s noticed his odd behavior,” he countered. “Even the servants have whispered about it. He hasn’t raised his voice once since returning from his birthday.”

“Could he have been taken over during the celebration?” Adam probed, raising an eyebrow.

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone tried,” Sylvia mused, her expression guarded. “But the Redwind watching over him assured us that he went unharmed.”

Adam’s skepticism remained. “How can you be so certain?” he pressed.

“I trust in our allegiance with them,” Sylvia replied evenly. “And I would know if anything had transpired.”

“A perplexing situation,” Adam murmured.

“Maybe he’s genuinely changed,” Eric proposed. “With his exile and all, he could have seen the error of his ways and turned over a new leaf.”

Irene let out a sharp laugh. “Be serious, Eric. This is the person who’s been creeping on the maids since he could form coherent thoughts. Every time we hire someone new, he’s on them like a parasite. I’ve told Sylvia for years now to hire only male staff, but she insists it’s ‘impractical’. Though, frankly, I’m not convinced even that would stop him.”

Eric bristled, his eyes flashing with annoyance. “Then tell me again why we put up with his antics?”

Irene’s voice flared with frustration. “That’s precisely why he’s being exiled! He can’t keep his mouth shut, and our family’s secrets are slipping out with every new maid. I still don’t understand why Sylvia and Father insist on waiting another year.”

Sylvia’s eyes narrowed, her tone cold as steel. “Blood runs thicker than water, Irene. You must know that.”

Irene exhaled sharply. “I do, but even he’s testing the limits.”

Adam rapped his knuckles on the table, drawing everyone’s attention. “Let’s not forget our primary objective here,” he reminded them. “Could it be that he’s already dead? Perhaps he’s been reanimated as a puppet, or worse, a homunculus bearing his likeness.”

Sylvia’s face tightened in suspicion. “I highly doubt that. Even with a perfect physical specimen, nobody could replicate his aura. And that’s assuming they could even capture him without our assassins catching wind of it.”

“Hmm...” Adam mused, drumming the table with his fingers. “Well, regardless,” he casually dismissed, raising a hand. “All those in favor of taking him out, say aye.”

Sylvia’s frown deepened. “Did you not hear a word I said?”

Adam shrugged nonchalantly. “Personally, I wouldn’t take any chances.”



"You're seriously an idiot." Sylvia deeply sighed.

Eric's brow furrowed. "You want to kill, Adam?"

Adam remained silent, but the message was clear.

"*Tch*." Eric scoffed. "Forget that I even asked."

"Are you disappointed because it's the correct choice?" Adam shot back.

Eric shook his head, his frustration clear. "You may have our best interests in mind, but this isn't the way to handle it."

Irene, finally choosing to speak, surprised Sylvia by offering a voice of reason. "Why not just keep tabs on him for now? We don't even know what he's up to. Let's observe and wait."

Sylvia nodded in agreement, a slight smile forming. "Thank you, Irene," she said, her voice sincere. "It's good to know there's still someone in this family who can think critically."

Irene raised an eyebrow, a hint of skepticism in her expression. "That sounded more like a pointed jab than a sincere compliment."

"We're both on the same side here," Sylvia responded.

"Is that how you sound like when we're on the same side?" Irene dryly questioned.

Adam shook his head, his conviction evident as he gestured towards the corridors, "Look, with each passing moment that he is free to wander here, he accrues a greater advantage over us. Simply possessing knowledge of our home's layout grants him an increasingly favorable hand."

"As I said before," Sylvia spoke firmly. "I don't believe he's been compromised. And who would dare devise such a bold plan against us?"

Adam's eyes blazed, "We have many enemies, Sylvia. It could be any one of them."

Sylvia's glare intensified. "Do you not think I realize that?"

"Well, then what do you suggest?"

"I will handle it," she declared. "Just leave him to me."

Adam took a second look, his aureate, discerning gaze locking onto Sylvia's own.

"You've thought this through, haven't you?" Adam asked, an intrigued smile barely twisting his lips.

She nodded.

"Very well," Adam said, his voice yielding. "I won't question your motives."

Sylvia swept her eyes over the rest of the room, looking for any lingering doubt.

"Is that settled, then?" she asked.

"Fine with me," Eric simply replied.

Irene grunted in resignation but gave a reluctant nod.

She didn't expect a response from Father or Mother, and Nina knew to stay silent. So, with a unanimous agreement reached, Adam snapped his fingers to



dispelling the protective barrier around them, and they returned their focus to their meals.

One by one, they cleared their plates. Adam was the first to finish, tucking a handkerchief into his pocket as he stood from the table and headed for the door. Eric followed soon after, and Irene and Nina weren't far behind after him. Meanwhile, Sylvia remained behind, summoning a maid to clear the table.

"What's on your mind, my daughter?" Father addressed Sylvia, motioning for her to express her thoughts.

A smile crept onto Sylvia's face. He knew her too well. "I wish to access your private collection," she said, her voice low and even.

Father's eyebrow arched in mild curiosity. "Do you plan to show them to Aaron?"

"He's expressed a desire to learn more about our family," Sylvia replied, her voice unwavering.

There was a brief silence before Father finally nodded. "Very well. You may use them."

Sylvia bowed deeply, her gesture one of both respect and gratitude. "Much gratitude," she thanked, her hands clasped behind her as she turned and glided silently from the room. Her footsteps were almost inaudible as she disappeared down the hall.



CHAPTER FOUR

Date: January 17th, 2050

Location: Train in Russia

If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.

— Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

The train rattled through the countryside, snow streaking past the windows in pale blurs. Inside, the air was thick with the scent of damp wool and cigarette smoke. Passengers huddled in their coats speaking in low murmurs, their faces pale under the flickering lights.

A little girl, bundled in furs, weaved between the rows of seats, entering into the car from another.

She moved slowly, her small boots tapping lightly against the floorboards until she stopped in front of a man sitting by the window. His black coat with the collar was turned up, his posture deliberate. The seat beside him was empty—an intentional choice, a quiet corner away from the others.

His hands were motionless on his lap as he looked out the window, barely aware of her presence. He wasn't reading nor shifting in his seat; he simply observed as the snow streaked past in a silent blur.

Other passengers dozed, fidgeted, checked their watches.

But he did none of that. He was aware—watching.

"Hello," the girl took a step closer. "Mister... are you a soldier?"

Aaron glanced at her, his expression calm but watchful. "No."

"Oh..." she said, unconvinced. "You look like one."

He exhaled. "Do I? What makes you say that?"

"You're too still," she said, tilting her head. "Everyone else fidgets or talks, but you just sit there like you're waiting for something. The soldiers are like that sometimes, too..."

"No harm done in being wary," he said with a faint smile. "Maybe you're right. I should work on blending in better."

She frowned. "Why?"

"Bad time to be a soldier," he murmured. "Hard job. High expectations. No rewards." He tapped the armrest once. "Better to be a traveler. Easier to disappear."

She glanced around, "There's more of them lately. They don't smile much anymore."

"Mm," Aaron murmured. "Understandable."

The girl considered his words a bit before replying. "Where are you traveling?"

"The same place as you." He nodded toward the window. "Moscow."

She huffed. "That's not what I meant. Where in Moscow?"

Aaron smirked and shook his head. "Not wise to ask a stranger too many questions." He gave her a look—measured, not unkind. "But you've got a sharp eye, kid. I'll give you that."

She crossed her arms. "I'm not a kid."

"Are you here alone?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm with my mother."

He raised an eyebrow, glancing past her toward the aisle. "Then all the more reason to head back. Storm's picking up. Don't keep her waiting."

"She's not," the girl confidently assured. "She thinks I wander too much."

Aaron leaned in, just slightly—enough to command her full attention. His voice was low, but firm.

"The storm's getting worse. Go check on her anyway. And listen carefully—if anything feels off, anything at all, take her to the back of the train. No questions. Understand?"

She hesitated before giving a slow nod.

"Alright. Good." Aaron leaned back, his posture easy but his awareness never faltering. His attention remained on the girl, though his senses stretched outward, listening. The train hummed beneath them, the steady rhythm of rattling metal and glass merging with the distant murmur of conversation.

The girl lingered a bit, her fingers idly tracing the worn fabric of her sleeve as she weighed his words. But soon, without another word, she drifted away. She didn't leave, however, settling instead into a seat a few rows down as she watched the blurred landscape rush past.

Hah. Aaron exhaled, shifting slightly.

Just then, her gaze shifted—past him, toward the aisle.

Aaron didn't move, didn't turn his head, but his eyes followed.

A tall man was making his way down the train car.



His coat hung stiff on his frame, his movements controlled. Too controlled. They weren't the absentminded sway of a traveler but instead something measured, deliberate.

The girl, restless now, had started shifting from seat to seat. First by the window, then across the aisle. A quick glance out. A fidget. A sigh.

Eventually, just as the man drew closer, she wandered back toward Aaron.

She stepped aside to let him pass, but he wasn't just walking around.

He was searching. Slowly.

Something was off.

Aaron remained still, his posture easy, unbothered. But beneath the surface, his muscles coiled, his hand drifting toward his coat. The girl turned back to him, bumping into his knee before catching herself. "Are you—"

Aaron moved.

Smooth, practiced like he had done this a thousand times before, Aaron drew his pistol, leveled it, and fired.

Two shots, center mass. A third, just to be sure.

The girl gasped, stumbling back, her eyes wide.

"Alright," Aaron gave her a sharp nod. "Remember what I told you."

For half a second, she froze. Then she turned and bolted down the aisle, vanishing into the cars behind. He exhaled, steadying himself. Slipping the silencer onto his barrel, he ejected the spent mag, slid in a fresh one, and racked the slide with a quiet click. Then, without breaking stride, he moved forward toward the front of the train.



The metallic clank of the wheels reverberated, the low rumble of the train swaying like a pendulum. The sky outside was pitch dark, save for the train's headlights cutting through the wintry fog.

Clack. Clack. Clack. Clack.

The steady rhythm of the tracks.

Then, the hum. Clear. Distinct. A subtle vibration underfoot as Aaron sank deeper into his seat. It seemed louder now. It always did after a fight. After the chaos of the last few minutes, he could finally take a breath.

The floor was marked by the aftermath—dark stains smeared across the once-pristine blue leather. But in the quiet, there was an unexpected stillness. The train's motion, steady and uninterrupted, allowed his mind to settle, drifting into its own thoughts.

In moments like this, when his mind was sharpest, Aaron often wondered how he had ended up here. The cold bit deep, seeping through his layers, the bitter



night wrapping itself around him. He'd cleared the middle of the train. They'd sent thirty—no, forty—people to guard the front of the train.

At one time, perhaps, he had longed for a simpler life—a life with a loving family, maybe a garden, hobbies that brought peace.

But then he remembered his mentor's words: "Life is the reason for our existence. Everything else is a privilege."

Aaron hadn't understood it then, so he asked what it meant.

His master's answer had been simple: *"Whatever life gives you, acknowledge it as a privilege. Breathing, living—these are gifts. When you understand that, the world is yours."*

Was it true? Maybe. Maybe not.

But Aaron believed it. That belief had guided him for years now.

While other kids played in the park, enjoying their youth, Aaron was entrenched in war. Perhaps he'd been robbed of a childhood he could never reclaim, but he wouldn't have it any other way. To Aaron, this path was better than a life of mediocrity.

The world was cruel. He knew that from the start. Orphaned, born in a place with little infrastructure, he saw the same struggles everywhere. People starved in the streets, parents lined up at the market for rations, and the cold, barren landscape remained ruthless to those unprepared to handle it. He at least had the benefit of knowing he had a place to sleep and a meal when he was younger, but even that was a precarious luxury.

It was moments like these that defined his world, when he gave thought to the meaning behind it all. Some thoughts were filled with anger, others with resentment, but most led him to the same questions and the same conclusion.

Why did people endure this? What was the point?

He'd determined that to exist meant to confront hardship. Those who overcame adversity would rise, gain power, and command respect. That was the path to meaning, a path of reason. After all, why choose mediocrity? A life like that felt hollow, uninspired.

Maybe he was simply naive, but how could he think any differently? From the start, he had been a pawn. He'd been dragged into this profession, and yet he chose not to leave it. There hadn't been the time or the opportunity for anything else.

"Hey, wake up," a sharp voice jolted Aaron back to the present. His head pulsed with exhaustion; three days without sleep had taken its toll. Just as he hoped for a moment to catch his breath, reality yanked him back. Despite his rigorous training, he found himself drifting in and out of consciousness.

Rubbing his eyes, Aaron met the gaze of the Russian figure before him—Asimov, his contact for the mission. Asimov studied him with a sharp, assessing look. The mission was simple: protect and rescue one man. For so many to die in



pursuit of that goal, it made Aaron wonder: what earned a person that level of respect?

"They said you were good," Asimov said, skeptical. "But you look like just a child."

Aaron stifled a yawn, his voice dry. "Yeah, well—I did take out half the train," he muttered, eyes half-lidded. "Cut me some slack. You got your director, didn't you? That mess gave your guys plenty of time to get into position up top. You should be thanking me."

"Yes," he said, pausing for a moment, "But now you've involved civilians. Children, even. I didn't think your organization would go as far as putting them at risk."

Aaron gave a small shrug. "We follow the parameters we're given. If avoiding civilian casualties was a priority, it should've been stated clearly in the contract. That kind of ask comes at a higher cost." He leaned back, his tone steady. "At the end of the day, I'm a contracted asset. Your boss knew exactly what he was signing up for." He paused. "Do you blame the knife for its sharp blade?"

"A tool with no regard for caution is dangerous. But what happens when it starts to rust?" Asimov said, his tone more contemplative now. "Worse still—what happens when the tool begins to think it's something more? When it starts to grow a bad conscience?"

Aaron's lips barely moved, his voice low but steady. "Listen, I do the job. That's what matters. Isn't that the same with you? You know how this profession works."

The man's eyes darkened slightly, "The work I do, I do for my people. The director will lead us to a better Moscow. That means a better future for my family." He leaned in, his gaze unwavering. "You may have your use now, but I've seen where people like you end up. Get too big for the leash, and they put you down."

Aaron's gaze never wavered. After a beat, his voice lowered, almost to himself. "I know where this road leads." His eyes shifted slightly, "But that's a conversation for another time." He narrowed his eyes to make a point. "I live my life the way I want to. Unless you want to challenge that... I'd suggest you keep quiet."

Asimov said nothing, but he gave him a long, unreadable look before turning away.

Meanwhile, Asimov's henchmen moved quickly, cleaning up the mess left behind. The train car was filled with lifeless bodies, each one being propped up in their seats with methodical precision. It was a tactic, simple but effective. If they needed a fast getaway, the police would likely check for the living first, giving them a crucial moment to vanish before anyone thought to examine the passengers.

"How long until extraction?" Aaron asked.

"Ten minutes," the man replied. "Once we reach the station, securing the area is on you."



"Got it." Aaron said, but inside, he couldn't believe it. He knew this mission would be tough, but he hadn't expected them to be so unprepared.

He'd stationed a few colleagues at the arrival point—standard procedure. As the youngest, he played the novice, gathering intel and eliminating threats before they knew what hit them. It had worked so far. His superiors, though, rarely appreciated when he strayed from protocol. He'd probably get chewed out for the body count, but they couldn't complain. That was simply part of the job.

Ring ring.

"*Speaking of superiors,*" he muttered with a sigh.

His phone vibrated in his jacket pocket. Aaron pulled it out and answered.

"You awake?" The voice cut through the silence, sharp and direct.

"As awake as I can be," Aaron replied, his tone even, betraying no hint of fatigue.

"They're reporting over half the convoy to New Moscow was wiped out. Is the target intact?" the voice asked, tone clipped.

"Yeah, that was me," Aaron responded flatly.

"Explosives again?" came the incredulous reply.

"No need to get into the details," Aaron muttered. "Most of them were expecting us anyway. I only took out the ones I knew were clearly armed."

"But the target?"

"Unharméd," he confirmed.

A brief pause followed. Then, a quiet click of disapproval. "ETA?"

"On schedule. No delays."

"Understood. I'll keep you posted. Our team is standing by."

"Copy." He slipped the phone back into his coat.

The Russian had been watching him closely. "Is that your contact?"

"Yeah," Aaron simply said. "Why, you interested?"

"*Tch*," he scoffed. "You know, you're not what I expected."

Aaron's lips curved into a faint smile. "And what did you expect?"

"I guess I can't say," he admitted. "I know you've got a reputation for getting the job done, no matter the odds, but the details about you? Scarce. Some say you're a prodigy. Others think you're just a myth. You've kept your identity well-guarded."

"Then perfect," Aaron said, clapping his hands together. "That's exactly how it's supposed to be."

Asimov studied Aaron for a moment before nodding slowly. "Well, the director trusted you, and he's a good judge of character. For all our sakes, and for Moscow, I hope your plan works."



Three minutes left.

Aaron checked his watch, the faint tap of his glove against the glass barely registering beneath the grind of the train. The steel beneath them groaned, the lights above swaying in rhythm with the storm outside.

No words were exchanged. Across from him, Asimov stood silent, arms crossed, boots planted like he was expecting a war.

Aaron's gaze lifted, steady and unblinking. "How much do you think a life's worth?"

Asimov gave him a slow look, uncertain if it was a joke. "That depends," he said cautiously. "Why ask now?"

"To me..." Aaron gave his own answer. "Not much. People live, people die. I've killed many before, and I'll probably die the same way."

Aaron reached into his coat and pulled out a sleek phone. A small red dot pulsed on the screen. He pressed it.

Boom.

The train rocked beneath them. A low, distant roar rolled down the cars—muted, contained, but powerful. Lights flickered once. The air shifted. Then came the sound of chaos—muffled shouts, screams, people scrambling at the far end.

Aaron slid the phone back into his pocket like it was nothing more than a receipt.

"Middle car's gone. Gives us six minutes before the search spreads forward," he said calmly. "Use it or don't. Up to you."

Asimov's hand hovered near his coat. "You set a charge on the train?"

Aaron didn't blink. "A little diversion."

"You're insane."

Aaron tilted his head slightly. "Wow. Never heard that one before."

A beat passed.

Asimov scowled but didn't argue. He gave a low whistle, and at once his men began moving—communicating through glances and brief gestures, already sweeping the car for exit strategy.

Aaron moved past them like a ghost, unhurried, each step placed with practiced precision. A black duffel waited two cars down—right where he'd stashed it.

He unzipped it on one knee. Inside: clean clothes, scarf, gloves, neutral colors that didn't stand out. He changed quickly, silently. The blood on his arms was nearly dry. The new coat covered it. The gloves masked the rest.

Behind him, Asimov followed, slower now. Warier.

Aaron spoke without turning. "The contract's fulfilled. Your director's alive, as promised. Moscow will welcome him. Whatever comes next is your burden."

He paused, just long enough for the words to settle.

"When the dust clears," he added, "tell him I'll be cashing in a favor. Sooner or later."



Asimov hesitated. His voice was quieter now. "You're just going to walk out?"
"Very observant of you," Aaron pulled his scarf up around his face.

Outside the window, flashing lights began to bloom against the snow. Sirens wailed in the distance, approaching fast.

"You'll be on their camera surveillance," Asimov warned.

"Trust me, I won't."

Aaron pulled the beanie low over his brow and opened the final door. Cold air rushed in, biting at the edges of his sleeves.

"I'll handle the rest from here."

He stepped out into the storm.



Aaron perched on a rooftop, gazing at the aftermath of the explosion in the distance. Watching with Delta had become their post-mission ritual, a usual occurrence. She was the closest in age to him, about seventeen.

Delta sat down beside him without asking. They watched the smoke curl into the sky.

After a while, she said, "That was a public station, you know."

Aaron didn't respond right away. "... I know."

She didn't press—just sat with it—then said, "You timed it well."

She paused a moment longer.

Then, quietly, she added. "There was still a lot of movement down there. Civilians. Elderly. Medics. Off-duty workers just trying to get home."

He shifted his weight. "It happens."

"You ever think it's too much?" she asked, not looking at him.

His eyes stayed on the firelight flickering in the windows below. "Sometimes."

She glanced at him, just briefly. "But not this time?"

"No," he said. "Not this time."

She leaned back on her elbows. "Clean enough, I suppose."

"That's something." He looked over at her. "You're not going soft on me, are you?"

"No," she replied. "Just wondering."

He let the quiet stretch a moment. "If it matters, I'll try to be more subtle next time."

Another pause. A breath of wind. Somewhere below, a dog barked, then stopped.

"You remember that outpost job last winter?" she asked.

"I do."

"... It felt quieter than this."

"It was colder," he said. "But yeah. I know what you mean."



She gave a faint smirk, then let it fade. After a moment, she shook her head. "Some lives matter more to some than others. Even if we don't care, someone does."

"Is that so?"

"I think so."

Aaron nodded slowly. "If someone wants revenge, they'll know where to find me."

She sighed, amused. "You're so dramatic." Glancing over, she gave him a light tap on the chest. "Maybe one day you'll pull a Grinch and grow a heart three sizes bigger."

"Wouldn't that be a sight," Aaron murmured, leaning back.

She shifted gears without missing a beat. "Anyway—hungry? There's a new Mexican place nearby. Supposedly worth the trek through this frozen wasteland."

"In Russia?" Aaron raised an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "Maybe there's a silver lining. World's getting smaller. More connected. Especially with those peace deals we helped push through."

"Well, Mexican doesn't sound like a bad idea," Aaron conceded.



Date: January 24th, 2050

Location: Hotel in Russia

Aaron had been taught to memorize a lot of things: names, dates, places, times, languages. Even the smallest tidbits, like the color of a sign or the orientation of specific board posts, could be vital in identifying where he was.

Initially, he dismissed it as somewhat pointless. However, his perspective shifted when he successfully pinpointed a location by examining a series of pictures provided by intelligence. It didn't take long for him to identify the general area. And then, of course, bombing the living daylights out of it until the target was neutralized.

The knowledge he sought out was pretty varied as well. Sometimes he would dive into books about fantasy and science fiction, and other times he'd investigate literature about history. He even read a book about economics and business once. But despite his varied interests, at the end of the day, what he excelled at was being an assassin.

Unsurprisingly, he hadn't been taught the shelf life of such a profession—maybe they never wanted him to retire.

He was still young. But was he meant to do this forever?

There were older assassins still in the field—men and women three, even four times his age. Maybe that was just how it went. The longer you lasted, the harder it became to stop. The accomplishments piled up. So did the reputation.



Eventually, governments either wanted you dead, or worse, kept you alive to serve their interests.

Either way, going back to ‘normal’ stopped being an option.

“What are you doing?” Delta asked suddenly.

She glanced over at Aaron, who was casually reclining in his chair. After wrapping up their mission, they chose a nice hotel to keep a low profile. The room was spacious, just enough for them to play the part of well-to-do teenagers enjoying a stay during winter.

“Just playing a web game,” he replied.

“This late into the night?”

“Gotta do something.” Aaron shrugged, clicking his mouse.

Her eyes watched his screen for a bit before asking, “What’s the point of this game?”

“You’ve never played?” he turned to her, surprised.

She shook her head, moving in a little closer.

“Oh, well it just drops you somewhere on Google Maps, and you have to guess where you are,” Aaron replied. “You get more points if you guess faster or closer to the original location.”

“They really made a game for that?” she cocked her head.

“They have a game for anything nowadays,” Aaron returned. “Anyways. The point is, it’s pretty effective at improving memory and recall. It comes in handy on the job.”

“I see...” she murmured, nodding faintly. A longer pause followed before she added, almost offhand, “The news said a few kids were caught in the blast.”

“Unfortunate.”

“Explosives are messy, Aaron,” she said quietly. “Will you be more careful next time?”

“I did my best to avoid casualties,” he replied, voice flat. “But if we’re thinking like the opposition, some consequences are inevitable.”

“I see,” she said.

He glanced at her. “Didn’t think you were the type to flinch at these things.”

“You know kids are different, Aaron.” Her voice stayed measured, but her gaze sharpened. “Some of the people who died—sure. Maybe they were part of it, maybe they weren’t. But dragging children into it when it wasn’t necessary... that’s something else.”

Aaron was silent for a moment. “Maybe. But if it’s between risking a hostage situation or ending it early, I’d still make the same call.”

She didn’t look away. “The kids on that train were innocent. You know that.”

“I know.” He exhaled, his voice lower now. “And yeah—they didn’t deserve that. But neither do the ones growing up in bombed-out cities or being used as bargaining chips by people worse than me.”

Delta shook her head. “You always find a way to justify it.”



"I don't justify it," he said. "I just live with it."

She hesitated, then gave a small nod, not quite satisfied but willing to let it rest. "Just... try to be safer next time, please."

Aaron let out a breath. "I'll try."

With a pause in the moment's resolution and a faint sigh, Delta turned to look at his screen. "What's the name of that website?"

"You wanna play?" Aaron glanced over to see she had gotten her laptop out too.

Delta wasn't one act 'casual' during their missions. Typically, she leaned towards the paranoid side, monitoring their surroundings for any potential intruders, but after a week without a hiccup, perhaps she was finally starting to relax. Though, that implied that Aaron would need to keep a watchful eye in her stead.

"Yeah, why not?" Delta replied. "Best score gets a favor from the other."

"A favor? How big are we talking?"

"We'll figure that out when it's time to cash in."

"Ah," Aaron raised an eyebrow. "One of *those* favors."

Last time he lost a bet like that, she made him dive into an ice-cold river in northern Russia—completely naked. No amount of training could make that pleasant.

After a few rounds, Delta picked up the game quickly.

The mechanics weren't complicated, but it still took her a few minutes to find her rhythm. Her guess time dropped—from ten seconds to nine, then five, then three—until she was regularly locking in answers within two seconds. Over the next fifteen minutes, she sharpened her instincts, her guesses becoming faster and more accurate with each attempt.

For Aaron, he kept busy maintaining watch, but he couldn't help but observe her progress from the corner of his eye. She was pretty good for a beginner, but then again, she'd had the same training he did, and she'd been at it for longer.

In a way, she came as close as anyone possibly could to understanding him.

To him, she was an even rarer person than he was.

Few women became assassins. Fewer still chose the kind of path she did. She preferred the field—direct action, clean kills—but there were lines she wouldn't cross. Seduction, manipulation, the shortcuts their mentors endorsed—she avoided them not out of naivety, but principle.

Aaron had always respected that. Maybe more than he let on.

Once, he'd asked her, "Why take the harder path?"

She'd looked at him and smiled with a peculiar expression that he couldn't quite decipher. Nonetheless, the words she spoke resonated with him more than he cared to admit. "What's worth more than your own peace?"

Aaron didn't argue. There wasn't much to say.



Their line of work was already steeped in compromise—the rotten systems, shifting loyalties, cruelty passed off as order. He'd come to see it as the natural order of things: the strong wrote the rules, and everyone else learned to survive beneath them.

"Alright, I'm ready for the challenge now," she finally said. "Do I just click the Party button?"

"Yep," Aaron replied.

After a minute or two of configuring the lobby, they found themselves pitted against each other in identical scenarios. Naturally, it was both a timed race and a test of accuracy, yet the times between their guesses were narrow—consistently within a one-second difference. The determining factor for victory would be proximity to the actual location.

...

"Damn," she frowned.

After about ten minutes of going back and forth, the gap between their scores started to get larger, and in the end, Aaron managed to secure the victory.

"To be fair, you only started recently," Aaron reassured. "Like... twenty minutes ago. With some more practice, you'd probably be able to beat me."

She waved him off. "You're just being nice."

"Maybe," he said, half-smiling.

She stood, brushing off her pants. "Anyway. Let's pick it up another day."

Aaron nodded and returned his focus to keeping watch.

A few minutes passed in silent contemplation. They were likely fine after this long—he usually only kept his head down for a few days before moving on—but with how significant this mission had been, they'd opted to keep low for a while longer.

For Aaron, it was crucial to ensure that everything left no trace, and he was constantly aware to eliminate anything that could lead back to them. As for her, she was occupied with her weapons, always meticulous about their order. Whether the simple cache she carried with her or the collection she had back at the base, it was a priority for her.

Then, out of the blue, Delta asked something.

"Hey... do you actually see yourself doing this forever?"

Aaron glanced up. "What do you mean?"

"Ever thought of settling down?" she clarified. "You know, retiring and moving somewhere safe to start a new life?"

He raised a brow. "Are you dying or something?"

"No!" she laughed. "I'm not *that* much older than you, you know."

"Sorry," he said with a small smile. "Just... people usually ask that when they don't have much time left."

She leaned back slightly, gaze distant. "It's just been on my mind lately."



Aaron studied her for a moment, then nodded. "It's not really for me," he said at last. "I don't think I'm built for that kind of life."

"Why not?" she asked.

Aaron shrugged. "What would I even retire for?"

"So you could enjoy life," she said. "Pick up a hobby. Learn something new. Maybe start a family?"

He shook his head. "Not a fan of kids. And I don't like the idea of someone using them against me."

"Then raise them to be strong," she offered.

"Still doesn't mean I want that," he said. "Not now."

She tilted her head, watching him. "But maybe someday?"

Aaron gave her a look. "Why the sudden interest?"

Delta let out a quiet sigh. "Just saying... this can't be it forever. There has to be something after."

"What we do changes the world. Maybe for the better," Aaron replied.

"You believe that?" she asked, her tone soft but uncertain.

"I do," he replied. "And right now, I think it's more important for me to find out what I'm really capable of."

She didn't push further. Just offered a quiet smile, more thoughtful than cheerful. "Maybe. But I think you'll come around. This life... it isn't meant to last."

"So," Aaron asked, "what else do you want out of it?"

Delta leaned her head back, eyes on the ceiling. "Maybe kids. Someday."

"Really?" Aaron asked.

"Not now," she clarified. "But maybe later. I don't know, I guess I like the idea of passing something onto someone. We spend so much time figuring things out... maybe the point is to leave those lessons behind. Even if our life was messy, maybe theirs doesn't have to be as much."

Aaron took a deep breath, thinking about her words.

Maybe she was right, but he didn't know what a family was like, and it wasn't something that really interested him.

"I guess I'll see when I get older," he thoughtfully responded. "Are you asking because you'd like to settle down with me?" he lightly teased.

She gave him a sidelong glance. "Was that a proposal?"

He blinked, caught off guard, then laughed it off. "I'm a bit young for that."

"Just a joke, of course." She smiled. "Still... it's something to think about."

"Eh~" Aaron narrowed his eyes in thought, "I still don't really see myself retiring."

"I often find that the world doesn't ask what you see," she said. "It just keeps moving. People change with it—whether they want to or not."

"Hmm... then perhaps I'll retire when I've achieved a certain goal."

"And what goal would that be?" she questioned.



He thought about it for a bit before finally stating, “I’ll become one of the best assassins.”

“You’re not one right now?”

Aaron shook his head. “I don’t think this is the peak of my abilities. Not yet.”

She let out a soft laugh—not mocking, just a bit amused. “Alright. Then I’ll wait for that day to come.”



CHAPTER FIVE

The Redwind Order, founded by the legendary Sora Redwind, holds a special place in our family's history. Our ancestors shared a close friendship with Sora, living together for many years, forging an unbreakable bond. Today, we honor that connection by maintaining a strong alliance with the Order, perpetuating the spirit of their friendship and preserving their legacy.

— Reiyu Aevum, The Cold Flame

Vendin was a man of action, not words. He valued deeds over talk and respected those who shared his determined approach to overcoming challenges. In his eyes, cunning was a formidable weapon, and determination served as a steadfast shield.

Vendin glanced at the letter in his hands, its gold and black designs catching the sunlight. It was from the Aevum Family. His eyes narrowed in frustration as he read the message: an invitation to teach the young noble, Aaron, magical combat. He'd completed countless tasks for the Aevum before, but this time, a heavy sigh escaped him.

He knew that Sylvia's 'optional' requests were nothing of the sort, and despite his reservations, there was no choice but to accept the task ahead of him.

"Devilish woman," he groaned in defiance. "She would have me charge into death."

As he soared through the clear blue sky atop his Windstreak Hawk, Vendin let a fleeting sense of ease wash over him. It wouldn't last, so he made the most of it. Days had passed since he'd spent long on solid ground, his nights spent in some ramshackle inn.

The crisp morning air was invigorating, but Vendin's thoughts were elsewhere.

The Yeti Horn was still secure in his satchel, its lock imbued with powerful magic that only he could unlock. Still, Vendin remained vigilant against the ever-present threat of thieves and brigands. These days, they seemed to be

growing bolder, and the untamed, magical creatures that prowled the land only compounded his troubles.

In the blink of an eye, the town of Trost appeared on the horizon, looming closer with each passing moment. It was his keen-eyed companion who first caught sight of their destination, issuing a soft chirp that roused Vendin from his thoughts.

To the uninitiated, Trost appeared as a mere border city constrained by its harsh surroundings—even Vendin himself had been skeptical during his initial visit. However, he soon discovered that such assumptions were far from accurate. Trost was thriving, attracting pioneering merchants and some of the most skilled researchers in the Three Kingdoms to its gates.

Vendin's hawks gracefully descended to earth, landing before the towering gates crafted from mana-tempered steel that served as one of the few entrances into the city's inner walls, walls built with impregnable, reinforced stone, strong enough to defend against savage beasts and magic-suppressing forces.

As Vendin approached the gates of Trost, two guards appeared before him, their hands raised in vigilance.

"Who goes there?" they demanded in unison.

"Vendin of Trost," he answered coolly, the words rolling off his tongue.

"And what is your business here?" queried the first guard.

"I had already told you my name," Vendin tilted his head, "Is that not enough?"

"I need a reason for your visit," the guard replied.

Vendin was about to explain, but before he could, the second guard interjected with a sharp jab to his companion's ribs. "Fool!" he hissed. "That's the Raven, you imbecile!"

The first guard recoiled in surprise, then quickly proffered a deep bow. "My sincerest apologies, sir," he stammered, his cheeks turning a low shade of red. "I've only just been stationed here, and I didn't recognize you. How was your expedition, if I may ask?"

"Quite successful. Thank you," Vendin replied with a nod.

"Excellent news," the second guard chimed in, his voice now warm and friendly. "In that case, we won't hold you up any longer. Welcome back to Trost."

As Vendin strode past, one of the guards suddenly spoke up, his voice low and uncertain. "Wait, shouldn't we check his identification?" he whispered to his companion. "How do you know he is who he says he is?"

The second guard shook his head, his eyes fixed on Vendin's retreating figure.

"No need for that," he murmured. "The hawks are proof enough. Besides, it wouldn't be in our best interests to get in his way, even if we wanted to."

As the gates opened before him, Vendin stepped into the thrumming heart of Trost, his senses bombarded by a riot of sights and sounds. Summer was in full swing, and the city was awash with activity. Amid the bustling chaos, Vendin



remained composed, taking in the lively scene: colorful street vendors with enticing voices competing for customers and the constant chatter of the crowd.

Vendin threaded his way through the streets, his keen ears catching the rhythmic trotting of hooves. With a wave of his hand, a polished station wagon soon appeared at his side, its dependable coachman and a trusty stallion readily accepting his ride. Climbing into the cozy confines of the waiting coach, he gave his destination. “Redwind Guild, please,” Vendin instructed.

“As you wish, sir,” the coachman replied with a deferential tip of his hat before urging the spirited stallion on with a firm command.

The wagon rolled lazily through the inner city, and at every turn, Vendin took in the stunning views. It’d been a while since he last walked the city—he’d forgotten how structured everything was, a quality other cities didn’t share in quite the same capacity. Nature had painted the streets with vibrant greenery and fragrant blooms, a stark contrast to the harsh, unforgiving landscapes he had recently traveled.

Had they renovated since his last time here?

After roughly an hour, the wagon approached the inner-heart of the city. Vendin was greeted by a well-ordered landscape of manicured gardens and artfully arranged shrubbery. The vigilant presence of the Aevum Aeternum, those charged with protecting the city’s prosperity, could be felt in every corner of this district.

Amid Trost’s vastness, Vendin was reminded of its substantial size. While flying on his hawks would’ve quickened the travel speed, strict airspace monitoring and protocols deterred him from taking such a risk. With another ten minutes of travel, the wagon finally rumbled to a stop.

“We’ve arrived,” the coachman announced, nodding as he reined in the horses.

Vendin stepped out, paying the fare with a couple of coins. As he stepped onto the bustling thoroughfare, his gaze fell upon the statue of the Red Raven.

And behind that... there it was.

Trost’s Redwind Guild.

He checked the straps of his bag, ensuring his precious cargo was safe and secure. Satisfied, he climbed the wide steps that led up to the lively hall. Upon entering, he found himself surrounded by a flurry of activity. Seasoned rangers and skilled tinkers alike were engrossed in their pressing duties and errands.

As a scavenger, Vendin joined the never-ending line, holding his bag securely at his side while keeping an eye on both it and his surroundings. Though he doubted he’d be robbed here, caution was like second nature to him, constantly safeguarding his valuables.

The minutes crawled by like an eternity, the wait dragging on for what felt like ages, but such was the unfortunate cost of the guild’s success and growth over the years: longer queues. With nothing else to do, the tedium simply persisted.



Every few moments, a bored woman on another aisle called out the next name, beckoning guild members forward. Eager to proceed, Vendin scanned the crowd vigilantly, his foot tapping impatiently.

“Next.”

A few more calls, and eventually, Vendin reached the front of the line. The accountant, a woman around his age, greeted him with a warm smile. He wasn’t one for idle chatter, but he knew a little small talk could smooth things over, and besides, she was an old friend.

“It’s good to see you’re still alive, Vendin,” she teased, leaning forward to get a better look at the bag. “What have you got for me this time?”

Silently, Vendin opened the bag, revealing the Yeti Horn like a hidden treasure. The accountant’s eyes widened in surprise as she reached for it, her fingers tracing the intricate patterns etched into its surface.

“Fascinating,” she murmured, a note of curiosity in her voice. “I wonder what they have planned for this.”

“I wouldn’t give it too much thought,” he shrugged. “They gather plenty of materials like this. Whether for alchemy, artifacts, or their personal collection, I’m sure it has its place.”

Quickly and discreetly, she stowed the horn under her desk, her eyes darting around the room to make sure no one had noticed. But despite her desire to keep a low profile, clearly she couldn’t resist the temptation to take another look at the item, as Vendin noticed her fingers lingering over its smooth surface.

“Thank you for bringing this to our attention,” she replied with a practiced tone. “How would you prefer to receive your payment?”

“The usual method will suffice,” Vendin promptly replied.

“Then I will send it to your personal account,” she nodded. “Is there anything else that you need from us?”

Vendin shook his head.

“In that case, it seems our business is concluded,” the accountant declared, closing the ledger with a soft thud. “A shame—I was hoping this would take longer.”

“You miss my company?”

“Perhaps,” she said with a light smile. “Anything on your mind? I’m free this weekend, after all.”

“As much as I’d love to accept, we both know I’m rarely in Trost this time of year,” Vendin said. “I wouldn’t want to lead you on.”

“Right,” she said with a playful laugh. “Of course, always so predictable. Can’t even steal one day away just for me?”

“Maybe when things aren’t so hectic,” he said, scratching his head.

“Commendable,” she nodded. “Well, you know where to find me.”

Then, something else pressed on his mind. Taking a deep breath, he decided to bring it up. “Actually, there’s something else I’d like another opinion on.”



The accountant raised an eyebrow.

"I've been tasked with teaching the Aevum's son," Vendin continued, letting out a sigh.

The accountant's face shifted into a sympathetic expression. "Ah... *that son*. I'd heard whispers about that, but I didn't think they'd push you into it so soon. The Aevum can be... complicated, especially with their heirs."

"I'm well aware," Vendin replied with a nod. "But I don't have much of a choice."

She leaned back in her chair, giving him a knowing, calculating look. "You know," she hummed, pondering her words a little longer, "if you're opposed, I could try tossing a few others their way. They just need someone skilled enough to train him, after all, though, few do match *your* qualifications."

"No, it's fine," Vendin shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," he affirmed. "It's just something I'll have to get over with."

"Ok," she said with a smile. "Just... tread carefully."

"You don't have to remind me," he sighed.

"Well, tell me how it goes," she said as she waved goodbye, "Don't die, now."

Vendin left the Redwind Guild and hailed another carriage. Settled into its comfortable seat, he gave the driver directions to the Aevum's manor, and the minutes until he'd arrive ticked by ever-quick.

Her warning lingered in his thoughts. The Aevum were notorious for their tight control over information, and Vendin knew well that appearances could be deceiving. With the youngest son's exile made public, why did he even need training? Could it have been a mere fabrication? Or was there something more complex at play?

After a few turns and minutes of silence, the grand manor came into view, prompting Vendin to straighten in his seat. With a determined breath, he stepped out of the carriage, bracing for the challenges ahead. Soon, he'd find out if the rumors were real.



CHAPTER SIX

As natural as the blood that flows through one's veins and the muscles we use to move, the magic we manifest is an extension of ourselves, unique to our needs and personalities.

— Historian Order, *The Unspeakable Power*

“You have a visitor.”

As the maid announced the visitor's arrival, Aaron's focus shifted from his training, his muscles aching from the intense exercise. Wiping the sweat from his forehead under the oppressive heat of the day, he marveled at how this body's former host managed to maintain some level of physique despite his alcoholism. It struck him as odd. Had he kept training because it made him more attractive to girls?

A week had passed since his first encounter with Sylvia. Though he felt slightly weaker than usual, his body now felt lighter and more agile, a stark contrast to his previous bulkier frame. He resembled a fighter skilled in close combat. While he had reservations about losing his size, he couldn't help but appreciate the newfound nimbleness and freedom of this body, all while maintaining his tall stature.

“Alright, send them in,” Aaron replied, wiping his forehead.

The approaching carriage at the mansion's front gate caught his attention. Although he was used to training indoors, the outdoor training grounds were more than suitable for his needs. Surrounded by lush greenery and fragrant flowers, he actually enjoyed the opportunity to exercise in nature.

Aaron halted as he spotted a tallish man stepping out of the carriage clad in light armor and a dark cloak adorned with gold and red patterns. The badge on the cloak stirred some unease, accentuated by the gleaming daggers at the man's side. Clear that he was an assassin of sorts, Aaron remained vigilant of the potential danger this visitor posed.

“Do we know what he wants?” Aaron asked the maid, glancing toward the suspicious figure.

“He’s been hired as your mentor,” she answered.

Mentor?

Sylvia mentioned hiring Aaron a mentor a while ago, but he’d envisioned someone... different. Wiser, older—perhaps a scholar brimming with knowledge. Yet the man before him wielding dual daggers shattered that expectation, appearing only a few years older than he was—at least the age he had been in his previous life. He supposed he didn’t mind though.

More than anything, he was surprised by how soon she’d found one. “That was quick,” he commented, Aaron running a hand through his hair as he pushed it out of his face.

“The Aevum have extensive resources at their disposal,” the maid added.

Naturally cautious, Aaron hesitated to accept help from strangers, especially when it came to his combat training. For him, combat was a skill honed over a lifetime, and altering its flow, even slightly, often felt like forcing his techniques into someone else’s mold. Yet, when he looked at the assassin, something gave him pause. Perhaps it was the calculating look in the man’s eyes or the quiet aura of power that seemed to surround him.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Aaron,” the man greeted, extending his hand. They were rough and scarred, clearly the product of many battles.

“No need for honorifics,” Aaron replied, shaking his hand. “We’ll be spending a lot of time together, I’m sure. So, you know my name, what’s yours?”

“Vendin, of Trost,” the man bowed his head slightly, his expression sober. “Sylvia has tasked me with getting you up to speed on the basics of combat and magic.”

“That sounds good,” Aaron nodded. “Could I offer you something to drink?”

Aaron snapped his fingers, prompting a nearby maid to quickly bring two glasses of cold water. She presented them with a curtsy. Vendin accepted it, guzzling his down while Aaron splashed his over his head, savoring the cooling sensation.

“We have a few hours before sundown,” Aaron said, shaking the droplets from his hair. “The maids can handle your clothes and lodging, but it might take a bit to get everything set up. I’d like to start learning magic as soon as possible, however, so could we start the training now?”

The maids sprang into action at Aaron’s command, darting to and fro with efficiency as they tended to Vendin’s belongings.

“Are you sure?” Vendin asked, his exhaustion evident.

“Not up to the task?” Aaron asked.

“Well, I suppose if you’re that eager to start,” a smile turned on Vendin’s face, and he stretched back. “As long as you’re sure you can keep up.”



Aaron met his gaze confidently. “Shall we begin?”

Vendin blinked, his directness coming through, and with a nod, he said, “Very well, then.”

As they prepared the training area, Aaron noticed Vendin observing him closely. Aaron remained cautious of the man’s intentions, but he didn’t perceive it as hostility. Rather, it seemed more like intrigue—perhaps he was trying to assess Aaron’s capabilities to determine the best approach. Whatever the case, Aaron chose to trust in Sylvia’s judgment.

“Tell me,” Vendin inquired, “what have you been doing so far in your training?”

“Nothing too grand,” he humbly answered. “I’ve just been focusing on improving my body, starting with the basics to gain a deeper understanding of how magic flows.”

“Well, that’s actually not a bad approach.”

“You think so?” he inquired.

Vendin nodded sharply and tapped Aaron’s chest. “Of course,” he said. “Your body’s a vessel for magic. The more formidable it is, typically magic follows.”

“Makes sense,” Aaron nodded.

“As for flow, energy originates in your Mana Core and flows throughout your body through Mana Circuits,” he explained. “They are the conduits for your magic.”

As he spoke, the gears turned in Aaron’s mind, processing the information. He’d read about this already, but hearing it explained to him like this was making more sense.

“Since you’re so eager to start, let’s kick off your first lesson,” Vendin declared. “But first, a question: Do you think you can enhance the capabilities of your Mana Core?”

Aaron contemplated for a moment before responding. “I think it’s possible,” he said slowly, “but it would be challenging.”

Vendin nodded approvingly. “You’re right. The ultimate capacity of your Mana Core is typically determined at birth—a natural wellspring of power. However,” he continued, giving a meaningful look, “there are ways to prolong its depletion. Magical items, breathing techniques, meditation, or even certain abilities can extend the duration of your magic, though not their scope.”

“So there’s no way to increase the capacity of your core later on in life?”

“Well, yes and no,” Vendin confusingly began. “Although you’re limited by your physical potential, the core never starts out fully developed. As you train it through continued use of magic, it’ll naturally grow to meet the body’s demands up to its maximum potential. Most people never push themselves enough to reach their full capacity, however, either because they don’t have the knack for it or because their magic simply doesn’t demand it.”



“Fascinating,” Aaron replied. “So, those born with an undeveloped Mana Core, how do they compensate for it?”

Vendin’s gaze softened. “Assuming they use magic at all, external reservoirs exist, if you have the means to acquire them,” he explained. “But most will have the baseline mana needed to function, if they need any at all. You only truly understand the full capacity of your mana as you reach the peak of your potential, and even then, other races will be naturally more attuned to mana.”

“Has any man ever reached that peak?” Aaron asked skeptically.

“Hmm,” Vendin’s mused, his eyes gazing off into the distance. “I know of one,” he replied slowly. “But he was a special case. Despite not having the largest Mana Core, he managed to achieve a level of power unheard of, though it came at a great cost.”

“And what cost would that be?”

Vendin exhaled, a hint of reverence in his voice. “Well, now we’re getting into history,” he settled into the story. “Long before settlers left their mark on the lands of Dventos—a terrifying dragon reigned.” His voice took on a steady rhythm. “At the price of his very life—he gained the strength to slay it. In the end, he claimed that title for himself—the Black Dragon—exchanging his life for the creature’s.”

Amazing.

There seemed to be limitations to magic, but for the right price, it almost seemed that anything was possible. For one man to trade his life for the power to slay a beast like that... his sacrifice was certainly admirable, but would Aaron be willing to go that far for strength? In his old world, people used the lives of others like pawns to further their own power, and Aaron knew this world would be no different. If magic could get him to the top, then Aaron would use it, but he wouldn’t make the mistake of dying again because of it.

“Well, since you’re here to train, let’s put your skills to the test,” he challenged Aaron. “A spar, if you will.”

“I’m not exactly well-versed in magical combat yet,” he admitted.

“That’s fine,” Vendin replied. “This will just give me a good indication of your baseline combat abilities, and it’ll help you understand your own limits too. It’s good to test ourselves from time to time.”

“You won’t hold back?” Aaron asked, wanting to fight Vendin at full force.

Vendin’s expression was firm. “I will refrain from using magical attacks,” he clarified. “But make no mistake, Aaron, I will not be so forgiving.”

“Very well,” Aaron agreed as he made the last preparations for the training area.

Efficiently, he cleared the space moving with a fluid grace, each motion executed with perfect precision and control.

Vendin knew that he was facing a formidable opponent.



Once they were both positioned on opposite sides of the area, Aaron stretched his arms and legs with a vicious intensity, his eyes fixed firmly on Vendin. With a deep breath, he adopted a defensive stance, his body taut and ready for action.

Vendin mirrored his movements, his eyes narrowing as he sized up his opponent. He could sense the raw power emanating from him as Aaron followed him with a focused and deadly gaze, like a venomous cobra poised to strike.

Sylvia's letter mentioned that Aaron was new to combat, but something about that wasn't quite adding up to him. Maybe it was his confidence or the presence he held, but there was a strange quality about him. He couldn't quite grasp what it was, but Vendin wasn't one to back down from a challenge.

Suddenly, taking the first move, Aaron broke his stance and launched himself at Vendin with the ferocity of a storm, his body coiling tight with energy. Despite his best efforts, however, his movements were sluggish and predictable compared to Vendin's lightning-fast reflexes.

But even so, Aaron's strikes packed a powerful punch, each blow landing with a resounding thud that shook Vendin thoroughly. As they danced around each other, Vendin almost felt a grudging respect for the new student. Every time Vendin feinted, Aaron's eyes twitched at the movement, adjusting just in time to block.

Aaron threw every trick he had into the fight, twisting and turning with sharp, rapid movements as he searched for an opening. No matter his efforts, however, Vendin wasn't so easily outmaneuvered. His body blurred, slipping past Aaron's attacks and landing quick jabs to break his rhythm.

Vendin felt the weight of Aaron's focus—each movement a test, a silent measure of skill. Vendin often relied on instinct, his sharp senses honed to catch the slightest mistake, yet so far, Aaron had made none. His stance, positioning, and spacing were nearly flawless. Perhaps it wasn't just skill. Perhaps it was the innate talent of an Aevum. Otherwise, where else could this prowess have come from?

Experiencing this level of proficiency firsthand was nothing short of thrilling for Vendin, and he could almost feel a heady rush of adrenaline with each sudden step. With a smirk, he launched another flurry of strikes at Aaron as he sought to push him to the limits.

But it seemed Aaron was more than up to the challenge, his body a blur of motion as he parried Vendin's blows with a combination of speed and force.

Vendin tried to close in and take him down, but Aaron didn't falter in the slightest. Each time Vendin attempted to disrupt his balance, Aaron adjusted his stance and lowered his center of mass. Whenever Vendin went for a hold, Aaron shifted his weight and aimed to catch him off guard. His legs and arms were in constant motion, never staying in one place long enough for Vendin to get a solid grip.



It was an unusual fighting style, one clearly shaped by experience rather than strict fundamentals, but where had he gained that experience? Vendin, a seasoned fighter, knew that patience was key, however. He waited, studying Aaron's movements, searching for an opening, and when one of Aaron's haymakers fell just short, he found it. In an instant, Vendin closed the gap, locking his arms around Aaron's neck in a tight chokehold.

Got him.

Vendin could feel the younger man struggling against him, his body thrashing and twisting as he tried to break free. But Vendin held on, his grip unyielding as he applied pressure to Aaron's windpipe.

A few more seconds.

He held on tight, but as he thought the match was coming to a close, something occurred that Vendin hadn't anticipated.

Shifting his weight, Aaron executed a swift maneuver, flipping his torso and bringing Vendin's entire force to the ground. In the brief moment when Vendin's grip weakened, Aaron broke free. Vendin tried to counter and pull away, but Aaron then transitioned into an unfamiliar grip, securing Vendin's elbow with both arms and pulling away.

The hold was binding, creating a lot of strain on his shoulders.

Was he already better at close-ranged combat than him?

As Vendin tried to break free from the tight hold, he could feel the force pulling his shoulders apart, putting them closer and closer on the verge of breaking.

"Stop," Vendin said, tapping Aaron's hand in a sign of surrender. "I concede."

Aaron released him from the hold, and Vendin stepped back, studying the younger man with a sense of amazement. This was unexpected. Even though close fights weren't his strongest skill, he hadn't expected Aaron to come even close, much less beat him.

"Well done," he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "You're clearly skilled in hand-to-hand combat. Did Eric teach you those techniques?"

"You know him personally?"

"He trained some of the Redwind in similar methods. It seems you've learned his teachings—quite well, might I add. You were flawless."

Aaron wiped the sweat from his face, quipping, "Already giving out compliments?"

"They're well-deserved," he nodded. "How are you with weapons?"

"I prefer knives, but I can work with anything," Aaron replied.

"As expected of an Aevum," Vendin agreed, taking a seat at the round table. He suspected Aaron actually had been trained, despite the widespread rumors of having no combat experience. Whether through his family or the Aevum Imperia, it simply didn't make sense otherwise. "Let's take a small break. Since you already have a solid foundation in combat, let's go over some of the basics of magic."



"Sure you don't want to continue sparring?" Aaron eagerly grinned. "We could make it a best of three."

"You want to keep going?" Vendin asked, raising an eyebrow.

Aaron nodded.

"Most people I know would be satisfied with victory and move on," Vendin commented, expressing his puzzlement.

"Well, I only barely came out on top," Aaron replied.

Vendin thought for a bit but quickly came to a response. "There's no need for that," he said, holding up his hands in surrender. "I am not naive to think your victory was due to luck or chance."

"You know what they say," Aaron replied, "the first time might be a fluke."

Vendin smirked. "Trust me, it wasn't. I've seen enough. The more we fight, the sharper your edge will get. You were adjusting to match me the whole time. If you'd chosen the path of a knight or warrior, you'd be a real force to be reckoned with."

Aaron nodded at Vendin, slightly embarrassed but not shying away from the compliment.

"I'm curious, though, why I'm here to teach you," Vendin admitted. "Your family doesn't usually send for outsiders to teach their own."

"Well, they would've taught me if I'd taken interest earlier, but magic's only recently caught my attention," Aaron replied. "I'm a bit of a latecomer to the field, so I don't have some grand goal yet, but I've come to see its impact. Now, I'm just trying to make up for lost time, I guess."

"Dreams of adventure?" Vendin suggested.

Aaron gave a noncommittal shrug. "Maybe," he answered. "Honestly, I'm still just trying to figure out where I fit in—where my place is."

"I see," Vendin nodded thoughtfully. "Well, a strong birthright comes with many responsibilities."

"If only it were so simple," Aaron sighed but didn't elaborate, and he didn't need to.

"Ah," Vendin simply acknowledged. "Of course."

Was it true then?

He found it conflicting that the Aevum would offer Aaron support when his supposed exile was only a year away, but perhaps they'd done it out of lingering obligation—maybe that was why they hadn't taught him themselves.

"Well, I'm sure you'll find your place with time," Vendin said. "Family or not, we all have our own responsibilities."

Aaron nodded, considering his words before replying. "I have been considering that perhaps I should carve my own path rather than follow someone else's."



"I can understand that," Vendin said. "It's hard to discover your true direction. As an assassin, I've seen firsthand that the world isn't always what it seems. But I'm confident you'll find your way."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Life has a way of guiding us, one way or another," Vendin answered, his gaze softening. "Clear or not, there are always forces shaping our choices." He paused, reflecting for a bit. "I once doubted being an assassin myself, but I eventually realized what it meant to be a good one—knowing who you work for and understanding the weight of every life you take."

Aaron raised an eyebrow, his gaze flicking to the daggers at Vendin's side. "You? A good assassin?" he teased with a smirk. "And here I thought you tended crops and livestock on some distant farm. With the way you fight, I hope you haven't been skipping out on training."

Vendin chuckled in a deep, amused sound. "Don't let the farmer look fool you," he said, a grin tugging at his lips. "I've been in this business longer than you might think. And trust me, I haven't exactly had the luxury of tending to fields. I've had my share of close calls, but those moments are when you really learn how to handle yourself."

"Sounds like you've had quite the life," Aaron replied.

Vendin stared off into the distance. "Yes, quite," he said, his voice trailing off. "But it's a life I chose, and I don't regret it." He turned back to Aaron with a pensive smile. "I'll admit, though, there are times when I envy the existence of the farmer. At least they have loaves of bread above the hearth to share with loved ones."

"Yeah..." Aaron leaned back, his face relaxed. "But the world's troubles aren't gonna fix themselves. Somebody's gotta do the dirty work, right? Better to be ready for whatever comes your way than just coasting by and hoping for the best."

"Now, that I can attest to," Vendin replied.

Aaron poured them both another glass of water, the refreshing liquid still somewhat cool. "Anything else you have to teach me today?"

Vendin shook his head, settling back. "No, let's call it a day. We've made good progress. Rest up, and we'll start fresh tomorrow. That way, we can make the most of the next lesson."

"Sounds like a plan," Aaron agreed, nodding.

Vendin gestured to a maid to approach. "How about a toast to celebrate?" he suggested, his voice full of enthusiasm. "To the young one's newfound passion for magic." He lifted his glass in a grand gesture.

Aaron grinned and raised his glass in response. "To learning magic."



CHAPTER SEVEN

Loyalty is a weapon of immeasurable value. Wars have been fought, lives have been lost, all in the name of fealty. It is the beating heart of kingdoms and the fuel that keeps their engines running.

— Historian Order, *A Dissonant History*

“Ah, damn,” Aaron winced, struggling to open his eyes against the blinding light.

His head throbbed like he’d taken a sledgehammer to the skull, and his thoughts were muddled by a thick fog. Despite his confusion, he knew one thing for certain: he definitely hadn’t drunk enough to warrant feeling this terrible.

He blinked several times, his vision slowly adjusting. As he took in his surroundings, an unsettling realization settled over him—this place was entirely unfamiliar. His body was firmly tethered to a frigid metal chair by uncanny chains, feeling almost alive as they seemed to tighten more against his resistance.

The room’s dim illumination stretched eerie shadows.

He had been in interrogation rooms before, but never like this.

Shit.

He shook his head, forcing himself to focus. Aaron quickly assessed his restraints and what little he had to work with. The cuffs were tight, but with enough effort, he could probably slip free. If it came down to it, he was ready to break a bone or two.

He couldn’t remember the situation that placed him here, but he would figure that out after he got free.

A heavy sigh escaped his body, and the sound seemed to echo through the empty space.

“You’re awake,” a clear voice cut into his mind, a hint of amusement in its tone.

That was... Sylvia?

A moment later, she appeared in front of him at the room's entrance. Aaron's mind spun as he began to comprehend the situation. "Seems like I am," he replied, his voice calm and collected.

This was bad.

Whatever was going on, if Sylvia was behind it, he knew he didn't want to be on the receiving end. He was familiar with her type—kind at times but ruthless when necessary. Immediately, Aaron started wriggling in his restraints behind his back, searching for a weakness to exploit. But he found none, and so focused on trying to escape he didn't notice Sylvia's approach until it was too late.

With a swift kick, the chair he was trapped in was pushed to the nearby wall, causing Aaron's hands to wrench out of place. Pain shot through his body, but he refused to let it show.

"You're quite crafty," Sylvia observed with a crooked smile, crossing her arms over her chest. "Already trying to break free. I like that."

Aaron winced. "You noticed?"

"Of course," Sylvia replied with a sly, cold look in her eyes.

How did this happen?

Aaron was slow to catch on, but the pieces slowly fell into place as he replayed the last memories he could recall. The drinks they had after training yesterday must've been laced with something, and now he was at the mercy of a side of Sylvia that his instincts told him to fear.

"Was it Vendin?" he asked.

Sylvia paused, perhaps considering whether to answer at all. "No," she finally said. "He just assumed you passed out after several drinks."

"So, this was your doing?" he asked, trying to make sense of it all.

"I'll be the one asking the questions," Sylvia coldly dismissed, her voice detached.

As she approached again, an unease washed over Aaron, and His eyes quickly landed on the metal table she'd brought over to him. Laden with a mix of both familiar and not-so-familiar tools, he knew exactly what awaited. He'd faced such situations before.

"I'm just here to get some answers. I assure you, it's nothing personal." Sylvia said, her smile ironic and taunting. "In the past week, your behavior has taken a peculiar turn. You've diligently focused on your training without causing a modicum of trouble or mischief—no harassing the maids, no fuss when asked of something, and you've refrained from even leaving the estate for days. It's as if you've become an entirely different person."

"Right... So is this my reward for that?" Aaron replied.

"You know," Sylvia began, her voice steady but sharply edged, "my brother always had a certain... *way* with words. He'd be rude, sometimes condescending, and always a little irritating. But never focused," she discerningly put.



"You know, things can change abruptly when you're confronted with a hard choice. I guess you could say I've woken up," Aaron reasoned.

She paused, her fingers tapping idly against the table. "I did consider that maybe his exile *had* changed him... but no—that wouldn't explain it," she narrowed her eyes on him. "He held his pathetic sense of pride above all."

"I thought you'd all be happier about this," Aaron shrugged. "Contributing to the family, isn't that good for all of us?"

Sylvia studied him, her expression unreadable. "Your negotiation skills have improved too," she stated. "You were never the type to keep your temper in check—always shouting, always letting your emotions get the better of you. It was childish."

Aaron let out a dry chuckle. "Well, thank you for that *riveting* assessment of my character," he said, a wry smile tugging at his lips. "Look, if you've got questions, ask away. That said, if we're going to be here a while, could I at least get some water?"

"It seems you are not understanding the seriousness of your actions." She leaned in slightly, her gaze drilling into him. "If the Aaron I knew isn't you... then who are you?"

"What, you think I'm a spy?" Aaron asked.

Sylvia shook her head. "No, not quite," she replied. "We have eyes everywhere. There hasn't been enough time for you to get replaced or kidnapped."

Was he really being monitored that closely?

Usually, he was vigilant of others monitoring him, but he hadn't noticed a thing.

"I didn't know I was so important to you," Aaron said with a hint of sarcasm.

"Even your banter has changed. All the more reason I'm confident in my assessment," Sylvia replied. "We monitor everyone within the family like this. You're not an exception to the rule."

"Well then I guess that settles that, then. You said it yourself," Aaron stated quickly. "I'm glad we can both agree it was a misunderstanding."

Sylvia placed her grip around a small incision knife, ignoring Aaron's words, "There are several other possibilities," she continued. "Among them, parasitic beasts, perhaps."

Aaron raised his eyebrows as Sylvia's words sank in. "Parasitic beasts?"

"Mhm," Sylvia nodded, her grip on the incision knife tightening. "If that's the case, I'll need to open you up and remove it. Depending on the creature, you may be under somebody's control."

Aaron let out a slow breath. "Well, that doesn't sound like a pleasant experience," he said, feigning nonchalance. "How about we consider an alternative?"



"Save it," Sylvia shushed, cutting him off. "I won't go digging around just yet. First, you will answer through this orb, and if you are dishonest, well..." she trailed off, carefully inspecting the blade in her hand.

Aaron shook his head. "No, I insist," he said, a wry smirk forming. "I'm sure we can—"

Before he could get another word out, Sylvia snapped her fingers. The sound cracked through the air like thunder, rattling his senses. Aaron didn't need an explanation. Her message was clear: Stay silent.

Reaching down, she placed a shimmering blue orb in front of him. The vessel pulsed with an eerie glow, its energy rippling outward in invisible waves. Aaron found himself unable to look away, yet the longer he stared, the heavier his head felt, his thoughts unraveling into a dizzying haze.

What was this thing?

Whatever it was, Aaron had a feeling his situation wasn't only going to get worse. He couldn't prepare himself against something that didn't know about.

He struggled to focus, attempting to turn his head away, anything to avoid looking at it, but the orb's power overwhelmed him, and he felt himself slipping into a sleep-like trance. Not even closing his eyes helped; his body seemed locked in place.

"Let's begin with the basics," Sylvia inquired. "Is your name Aaron?"

"Yes," Aaron replied.

"Are you affiliated with the Aevum household?"

Aaron nodded, his gaze fixed on the orb. "Yes."

"Have you ever lied during an interrogation?" Sylvia pressed.

"No," Aaron responded, hesitating for a moment. "Well, actually, I'm not sure."

The orb flared an ominous red. His stomach dropped—he'd answered too quickly.

He barely had time to process his mistake before—

ARGH!

Sylvia had seized his hand and, without hesitation, tore off one of his fingernails. White-hot pain shot through him, his jaw clenching and his breath catching in his throat. Blood welled at the exposed nail bed, but Sylvia remained unmoved, watching him with cold detachment.

"Let's continue on," Sylvia said, placing the fingernail on the table. "Are you a spy?"

Aaron clenched his jaw, his pulse hammering in his ears. He forced himself to stay composed, though every nerve in his body screamed otherwise. "Nope," he said, shaking his head.

Before he could say anything more, pain exploded through him again—another fingernail had been ripped away without hesitation.



“What?!” He sucked in a sharp breath, his teeth grinding together. “That can’t be right.”

Sylvia didn’t so much as blink. “So you are a spy.”

Aaron’s mind raced.

He needed to choose his words carefully.

“Alright, wait. Wait,” he said, exhaling through the pain. “I am what you would call a spy,” he admitted, his voice steady despite the agony. “But I’m not currently spying on anyone.”

Sylvia’s eyes narrowed in suspicion as she waited for the orb to respond, clearly expecting it to flash red, but it didn’t. “Explain,” she demanded.

Aaron took a steady breath, meeting her gaze. “I *was* a spy, once,” he said, the words heavy in the silence between them. “But I’m not working for anyone now. No crime groups, no factions. I’m not about to betray my family, or anyone else, for that matter.”

The room fell silent, both Aaron and Sylvia’s focus on the blue glowing blue sphere as they awaited his judgment. He reevaluated every word in his mind, paranoid of mistake, but after several seconds of its constant blue hue, Aaron’s breaths came easier as he realized no deception had been detected.

Sylvia’s expression shifted with a brief flicker of confusion, but she quickly regained her composure. “Then what is your mission?”

“I’m not on a mission.”

“And you’re sure?”

“Positive.” Aaron nodded.

“Well... you’re not lying,” Sylvia mused, raising an eyebrow. “Who sent you?”

“Hah,” Aaron scoffed, a half-chuckle escaping him. “Honestly? I’ve got no clue.”

Sylvia regarded him with a skeptical gaze, clearly not buying his answer. “Peculiar,” she muttered, pacing around his chair like a predator circling its prey. “Are you here to assassinate anyone?”

“Definitely not. No assassinations here,” Aaron quickly replied.

“Are you an assassin?” Sylvia pressed, her gaze fixed on him with intensity.

“Yes,” Aaron admitted.

Several more questions were asked, with Aaron doing his best to answer truthfully and honestly. Despite his best efforts, however, it was clear that Sylvia remained unconvinced. Her eyes were cold as she studied him, as if trying to read his very soul.

“I am at a standstill,” she finally declared, coming to a stop in front of him. She placed her hands on Aaron’s shoulders, her touch surprisingly soft but with an undercurrent of tension. “Either you are very skilled in deceiving the orb, it’s broken, or you are being truthful.”

“Well,” Aaron said, “can I speak freely now?”



Sylvia regarded him with a skeptical gaze, but then she nodded slowly. "If you believe you can provide a satisfactory explanation," she said, her voice frigid and distant.

"I wasn't attempting to conceal anything, but the truth is, I am your brother," Aaron began, articulating each word deliberately. "But, in a way, that statement also isn't entirely accurate. I died, not long ago, in another... world, and woke up in this body. My working theory is that it's some form of reincarnation."

The bewilderment in Sylvia's eyes was palpable, and for a long moment, there was only silence between them as she processed his words. "That's a bold claim," she said finally, her tone tainted with skepticism. "Do you have any proof to back it up?"

Aaron shook his head. "I don't have any concrete physical evidence," he confessed, "but it's the truth. I can recount my life before I arrived here."

Sylvia appeared to carefully analyze the validity of his statements, giving them some thought. "Then keep going. I'm interested to hear more," she said finally, setting down her utensils as if giving him her full attention.

"So, I believe I am both your brother and myself," Aaron continued in a measured tone, taking his time to find the right words. "I come from another world, another time, vastly different from this one. It's devoid of magic but appears much more technologically advanced."

Sylvia's frown deepened as she struggled to comprehend what he was saying. With a hint of annoyance in her voice, she replied, "So, then, who is it I'm talking to?"

"I'm not entirely certain," Aaron admitted. "It's possible there's some overlap in cognitive space with your... other brother, but I don't hear any voices aside from my own. My emotions and experiences are distinctly mine."

"Strange..." she murmured. "Very strange."

Aaron nodded. "Agreed."

"Alright," Sylvia scratched her head, looking genuinely perplexed. "Let's say I take you at your word. Why *shouldn't* I just kill you? If you're telling the truth, then it seems to me like you've already been compromised. If my brother's still in there somewhere, it seems you hold the reins regardless. If that's the case, Father won't question it."

"I understand your skepticism, but let's not jump to conclusions too quickly," Aaron said, keeping his voice steady despite the weight of the situation. This was the closest he had come to successfully bargaining for his life, and he wasn't eager to jump back into the arms of death. "I'm not sure of all the details, but I can tell I'm not fully... me. I struggle to recall them, but I can feel his memories there leaching into my own."

"You'll have to do better than that," Sylvia flatly replied. "Assuming your story is even true, that is. You may have taken over his body through other means and are simply using this excuse of a 'reincarnation' as a way to hide your real intentions."



For a moment, Aaron faltered.

How could he prove something like this?

He understood her hesitance—there was no precedent for something like this. Who would believe in different worlds and dimensions? Then, inspiration hit him like a flash of lightning. “I have knowledge of technologies and scientific advancements you won’t find here, innovations this world hasn’t seen,” he claimed. “And besides, killing your brother just because someone else shares his body and mind seems... a bit extreme, don’t you think?”

A heavy silence fell, and Aaron’s heart raced with anticipation. He hoped Sylvia would believe his words or would at least entertain the idea. While it was true, he certainly didn’t know all the intricacies that went into the technological advancements of his old world. But if she accepted his claim, it could at least buy him some time to think of a better solution.

“‘Share’ is a *generous* term,” Sylvia said, her eyes narrowing. “But you’re right anyway. This isn’t what a parasitic beast would do to him. It could be some other form of magic though...” she paused, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. “Even after all these years, it seems magic still manages to amaze me.”

Aaron could tell Sylvia was starting to buy his story. He wasn’t sure if it was enough, but he didn’t have any options left. No strategies, no backup, no allies to call on. All he could do was wait, his mind racing as he anxiously anticipated Sylvia’s next move.

She paced the room a while longer, her gaze flickering on occasion between Aaron, the orb, and the floor. Then, finally, she stopped and turned to look at him with a blank visage.

“I believe you,” Sylvia admitted.

Thank god.

His shoulders slumped as a mixture of relief and defeat washed over him.

She moved over to release his restraints, and the chains fell to the ground with a loud clang, setting him free. Aaron glanced at his hands, trembling with shock despite the equanimity his mind tried to maintain.

“So, what now?” Aaron rubbed his wrists. He looked at Sylvia, unsure of what to expect next.

“Now, we have to explain to Father your predicament. You’ll be going to meet him.”

Mention of meeting his father sent a chill down Aaron’s spine. It was strange, but the prospect of confronting the man who had raised him left him lightheaded. Like the quivering of his hands, he couldn’t understand his body’s reaction. He’d confronted numerous enemies in his past life as an assassin without hesitation, and yet here he shook. He knew what he had to do, so why wasn’t his body complying?

“Now? He’s not busy?”



“I understand your uncertainty, but we have no other choice. If you want to clear your suspicion and confirm your identity, you will have to seek an audience with him,” she asserted. “Trust me, he is just as curious to know the truth.”

“Great...”



CHAPTER EIGHT

In Trost, the City of the Hidden Blade, the Aevum family built from the ground up a legacy that only time could challenge, rising to become one of the most powerful forces in not just the human empire but the entire world.

— Cynthia Alzara

Aaron lay back on the couch inside the Aevum Library, his thoughts tangled.

Why did this feel so unsettling?

It was the kind of unease he usually felt right before a mission, but this wasn't a mission. When he heard footsteps approaching, he straightened up immediately.

"He'll be free in about an hour," Sylvia said, glancing at him. "In the meantime, sit tight."

"Are you sure this is the right way to handle it?" Aaron asked. "Can't you just ask him for an extension on the exile? I'm sure he'd understand."

"Good one," she chuckled, a light sound that didn't reach her eyes. "But Father doesn't quite operate like that. But at least you're not going to die now—well, probably."

"Very reassuring," Aaron scratched his head, the discomfort lingering. "But... I don't know. Something just doesn't sit right with me going into this meeting."

"Meaning?"

"It just feels... unsettling."

"Is that you speaking?" she asked, her tone curious. "Or the Aaron that I know?"

"Not sure," Aaron shrugged. "Maybe both."

"So dramatic," Sylvia teased, rolling her eyes. "Anyway, since we have time, I'm curious. Tell me a bit about your old life."

Aaron was a little surprised at her interest, but he leaned back, a small smile forming on his face as he began, "Well... not much to tell. I was an assassin for a

shady organization. They sent me on missions now and then, usually with a solid team. The pay was decent, but I was never a big spender. I mostly just put it into assets.”

“I see,” Sylvia replied, intrigued. “How did you get into the profession?”

“I was kind of forced into it at a young age,” Aaron said, shrugging. “But, to be fair, things could’ve been worse. I could’ve been an orphan my whole life with nothing to show for my skills.”

“Hmm.” Sylvia leaned back slightly. “I was an assassin at a young age too, so I get it.”

Aaron raised a brow. “You were?”

“Well,” she said evenly, “the term *assassin* might mean something different here than it does in your world. I was trained in combat and magic, yes—but my skills were mostly used to deal with threats to the family. That sort of thing.”

“I imagine that becomes more complicated with magic in the mix,” Aaron mused. “Where I come from, people are... fragile. A knife, a bullet—it doesn’t take much to end a life.”

“I suppose it wasn’t much different here not too long ago,” she reasoned, turning a thought over in her mind. “The empire only permitted magic a century ago, after all. But since I’ve always lived with it, I’ve never really considered what life would be like in its absence.”

She looked to the ceiling, let the thoughts settle for a bit before continuing. “But my abilities aren’t just used to silence those it needs to. I much prefer controlling the future so it doesn’t have to come to that to begin with,” she shrugged lightly. “Still, I suppose the goal never changes, even in different worlds with different rules.”

Aaron’s brow furrowed as he processed her words. “So, now you focus on information instead?”

“Yeah,” she said with a small shrug. “I handle much of our logistics.”

“I see,” he nodded, looking around the room. Given that she took to the library, it made sense she enjoyed the pulse of knowledge. “Did you enjoy it though?” Aaron asked, his voice curious. “Being an assassin?”

She shook her head. “It was what I had to do. I wouldn’t say I enjoyed it.”

Aaron let out a breath. “Yeah, I get that. I didn’t really enjoy it either,” he replied, his voice distant. “But I think that may be because I never got to move on. I was always focused on the job, on training to ensure the job got done well, and that was... everything to me. I came close to getting out, but, well, clearly that didn’t happen.”

“Ah,” she acknowledged, her tone thoughtful. “They thought they’d tie up their loose ends before they got tangled in someone else’s web.”

“Seems that way,” Aaron sighed then raised an eyebrow. “Do you guys do that?”



"Sometimes," she confirmed with a shrug. "We try to avoid it when possible, but situations can get... tricky at times. Some methods exist to help ensure people can't reveal our secrets, like magically-binding contracts, but those come with their own costs, and there are always people who will find ways to circumvent the rules."

"Understandable," Aaron replied.

He supposed that in a world of magic, the number of complications that could arise was innumerable, but even without magic, knowledge was still power. Whatever the case with his old life, whether he'd been set up by his superiors or betrayed by somebody else, perhaps he should've seen it coming. Maybe if he'd flown a little bit outside of the cage, he would've seen the larger picture. But it was too late for that now.

"In your previous life," Sylvia began, reeling back in his focus, "did you have anyone you loved?"

Aaron shook his head. "No." Then he paused, his eyes distant. "Well... maybe. I'm not sure if that's what I'd call it, but there was this girl, Delta. She didn't even really have a real name, but... I always liked her. We worked together for years."

"So you were both assassins," Sylvia commented, a little surprised.

"Yeah. She wanted to retire early, start a family, and disappear off the grid—and she kept urging me to do the same," he reminisced. "At first, I kept making excuses, saying I wouldn't know what to do or that we needed more money. But in the end, she convinced me."

Sylvia sighed, folding her arms. "I'm sure she misses you."

"Well," he began, pausing a moment. "We were both on that last mission together."

"Oh," her eyes softened. "Sorry to hear that."

He gave a short nod in recognition, and a wistful smile crept over him as his mind flashed to his last memory of Delta—the last look of color in her face as it faded away.

"I couldn't imagine living again after death. I'm not sure if it would be a blessing or a curse," Sylvia tilted her head, studying him for a moment. "So, do you plan on returning?"

Aaron looked up, "Is that possible?"

"No idea," she said. "Not as far as I know, but your entire situation is novel."

"Then... probably not."

Sylvia raised an eyebrow. "You won't even try?"

Aaron shrugged. "I don't have anything to go back to."

"Mmm," Sylvia hummed in recognition. "Then what's your plan?"

Aaron shifted on the couch, stretching out and running a hand through his hair. "Honestly? I'm not sure. I wanted to learn magic, but maybe I should take a break and see what life has to offer," he let out a deep breath. "I never really let myself do the things I wanted to. I never felt like I had the time."



"Well, that's most people, isn't it? Never enough... time," she picked up a pillow, holding it loosely against her chest. "The key is to make the most with the circumstances you're given."

"That's true," Aaron nodded, "Much easier said than done, though."

"Talk to Father," Sylvia replied, leaning back in her seat. "I doubt it, but he may grant you the time you need," she half-heartedly shrugged. "But it's not becoming of the Aevum to mope for too long. You're in a new world with new circumstances. That's more than most people ever get. Maybe that's a sign you have more to live for."

"Perhaps," Aaron conceded.



Aaron's footsteps thudded on the marble floors, each step echoing in his ears like a heartbeat. The grand double doors before him loomed ominously, and his whole being resisted entering. He tried to dismiss it as imagination, but a heavy dread settled in his gut. It was like every step closer to the room spelled his doom. Sylvia led the way, her posture rigid, while Aaron's mind raced with worries.

Swish.

The doors opened to reveal a grand room.

"Sit down here," Sylvia instructed, pointing at a nearby chair, her voice reverberating in the silence of the room. Aaron complied, his eyes taking in every detail of the cluttered space. Books and portraits lined the walls, and weapons and strange items were scattered throughout the room.

It appeared as a mess, yet everything felt as if they were in their places, a strange sense of order amid the chaos. In the center, a large table dominated the space, and a man sat at its head. His golden eyes were tired, deep creases etched around them as he worked on filling out paperwork. A couple quill pens floated in the air in front of him, while another was held in his hand. When the man looked up and saw him, a palpable tension shot between them making his skin crawl.

As Sylvia approached the man, his golden eyes flickered to her with recognition, yet he remained stoic. "What is it that you want?" he asked, his gaze drifting between the two siblings. Aaron felt a pang of discomfort and shifted himself in his seat. He wanted to speak, but his voice seemed stuck in his throat.

"I would like to talk about Aaron," Sylvia stated firmly, pointing at him.

The man returned his focus to Aaron for just a moment at the mention of his name, and instinctively, Aaron bowed his head slightly in recognition.

Sylvia continued, "Aaron tells me that he has come from another world and that he's reincarnated into the body of our younger brother. He wishes to discuss with you the exile you have placed on him."



"Is this another one of his tricks?" Father's skepticism pervaded the room. But before anyone could respond, Sylvia turned slightly to fix her gaze on Aaron, urging him onto his feet.

Standing up, Aaron cautiously walked to the table in the center of the room near Sylvia, and as he looked towards his father, a sharp stare locked back onto him, assessing him quietly. Aaron could feel the weight of his gaze, and it was as if the room had grown a few degrees colder. "Speak," he commanded, his quill pens still hovering in the air.

Aaron drew in a deep breath and steeled himself before addressing him. "Yes, I wish for you to cancel the order of exile on me. I want to be accepted back into the family."

Father remained impassive, his face unreadable as he considered his son's request. "And why do you want it so?" he asked finally.

"I believe his actions are not my own, and thus I should not be punished for them," Aaron replied, his voice steady.

The man's gaze sharpened. "If what you say is true, does that mean it is not your body either?" He paused, then added, "Even if you inhabit his body, you are not truly him. And in that case, I have no reason to consider your words."

The room fell silent, the weight of the words settling over Aaron. The man's scrutiny felt like a crushing pressure on him.

How could someone occupy so much space in such a large room?

"I understand," Aaron said after a beat. "But I don't believe it's so simple. Your son's memories... Although fragmented, I can feel some of them in me as if they're my own. I'm not sure to what degree, but I don't believe it's just me."

The man's eyes narrowed, considering his words, and then he turned to Sylvia, his gaze searching hers for any hint of deceit. "Weigh in on this, Sylvia. What do you think?"

His voice was low, heavy with intent. Sylvia met his gaze, her eyes steady, clear. "I've interrogated him thoroughly," she replied. "Confirmation is, of course, difficult... but I believe he speaks the truth."

"Is that so?" he mused, his brow raised slightly at her response. "But I'm not the kind of person to leave their fate to chance, no matter its origins—even if it comes from my own family." His tone grew steely. "Your request is denied."

"But—"

"That said," he cut in, raising a finger, "I must ask—why stay at all? Exile would suit you better. Fragments of memories or not, you're not the kin I once knew. That much, I'm certain of. So why cling to his birthright? It was never yours to claim."

"Well, it seems logical to me," Aaron replied. "This family is well-renowned, and it'd be better to be someone placed in a position with resources than someone without any. Perhaps that sounds... materialistic, but all anybody wants is prosperity."



"So, is that what you're after, then? Wealth? Power?" he remarked, eyes narrowing.

Aaron paused, considering. "No, I wouldn't say that." He spoke slowly, as if untangling the thoughts as they came. "I'm not blind to the advantages the Aevum name brings—connections, influence, the kind of doors most people never even see. But that's not why I'm here. And it's definitely not why I want to stay."

Aaron gave a small nod, almost to himself, as he processed the thoughts running through his mind.

"I think... I feel like I owe your son something," Aaron continued. "He gave me a second chance at life. It's hard to explain, but exile doesn't feel right. Not yet. If I leave, I want it to be by my choice—not because I was pushed into it."

"I see," the man said, his voice calm, measured. But it was the eyes—those eyes—that unsettled him. Even looking in his direction sent a cold tremor down Aaron's spine. "So," he continued, "you want to stay neutral. Not cast out but not bound either. Free to choose."

Aaron nodded, "Something like that."

The older man studied him for a long moment, as if weighing the truth behind his words. Aaron held the gaze without flinching, his thoughts resolute. Joining the Aevum family would accelerate his growth in this world—that much was obvious.

But strength... strength had to be earned, one way or another. If exile was the only path left to him, he'd walk it. He could still forge his own way. Still, he couldn't deny it—having the family's support would've made the journey easier.

"Poetic," he chuckled softly. "There's honor to you, something my son lacked. You're definitely not him—you're more... honest. Sometimes that can be a dangerous trait to have, but it's not one to ignore." He paused, ensuring Aaron's full attention before continuing. "The... *other* Aaron misunderstood the reason for his exile. If you're to take on his name, allow me to correct his misconception."

Aaron could only nod in response.

"He was mistaken in thinking his exile was caused by his crude actions," he elaborated, bringing his hands close together. "It was not." Leaning in slightly, he continued, "The true reason was that he believed life should be lived in solitude. He failed to understand our interconnectedness." He leaned in further, eyes locked on Aaron's. "You seem more discerning than he was. Care to enlighten me on what he missed?"

Aaron met his piercing gaze, a kind of... clarity coming from the tension.

Years of living as an assassin had taught him how to rely on his instinct and skills, how to survive when nobody else was there to help him. But despite that, he understood what the other Aaron had failed to see.

"He neglected his family," Aaron said plainly.



“Correct,” the man said with a nod. “Had he not turned his back on his birthright, we could have tolerated his... impulsive ways. But for someone who holds no value in it, why should he enjoy its privileges?”

“A reasonable judgment,” Aaron concurred.

Father’s expression shifted with a hint of amusement in his tone, “Yet it seems fate has offered you—or perhaps even him—a second chance. Life has a strange sense of humor.”

“If you’ll permit, I will try my best to correct his missteps,” Aaron replied. “Even though I also don’t know much about what it means to have a family.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep. And be careful with the ones you do make—especially in this family. They carry more weight than you realize,” he said. “That said, I’ll acknowledge your words.” His gaze sharpened, his eyes narrowing as he studied Aaron with greater focus. “But I can see that something else is troubling you. You’re still trying to make sense of it yourself, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is your *purpose* in seeking my blessing?” he pressed, his tone growing sharper. “You wish to remain within the Aevum family, to enjoy the prestige that comes with it, but for what end? I’ll grant that power may not be your primary aim, but people often veil their true intentions behind well-crafted words. Now only one question remains. What is it that you *want*?”

Aaron took a deep breath, looking within himself.

What did he want in this new world?

There was no sense in trying to spin falsehoods here—he had a feeling they would be easily uncovered, and the consequences would be dire. Father’s eyes spoke volumes, conveying the readiness to end a life without hesitation. More than that, however, it was a question Aaron needed the answer to as well.

“There were aspirations from my previous life that I didn’t get the chance to fulfil,” Aaron began, the words gradually coming to him. “I can’t guarantee a return to that world, so I would accomplish them here.”

“And what goals do you hope to accomplish?”

Aaron paused, uncertainty flickering across his face. “I’m not entirely sure.”

Father scoffed. “You know the answer. Do not shy away from it now.”

His mind searched a little more, grasping onto a thread. “I... always had this feeling that my life was in the hands of others. Although I would be considered strong in many ways, I think that I was weak in most,” he looked up to meet the unflinching pair of eyes ahead of him. “I want to grow stronger—strong enough to alter the course of events in my future so that my life is in my own hands.”

“And how do you intend to achieve that?” inquired Father.

“To master the one thing my world never had,” Aaron replied. “Magic. I want to grow stronger—through it, because of it.”

“Hmm,” Father leaned back, his gaze sharp as he studied Aaron. “So you want to become a great mage? A rather mundane dream,” he remarked.



Aaron supposed in a world like this, that was a common ambition.

Yet Father leaned back in his chair, thoughtful, a shadow crossing his features. “The road to mastering magic is a long one,” he said, his fingers absently stroking his beard. “Aspirations alone won’t carry you far. You may find your talent... insufficient.”

He paused, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“You’ll be up against others—many of them—and not all will welcome your ambitions. There are powerful mages in this world, Aaron. And some of them won’t hesitate to crush those who reach too high.”

“I’ll still walk the path that needs to be walked,” Aaron said, his gaze lowering.

“Will you?” He asked, “Do you truly understand what that means?”

“I do,” Aaron nodded.

“Bravo. I like your answer. It seems I’m beginning to understand what freedom means to you. As such, I’ll grant your request,” Father said, rising to his feet.

“From here on out, your actions will decide whether you earn my respect, and so allow me to revise my initial ruling. Your exile *can* be revoked,” he paused, his eyes narrowing. “But it won’t be without effort.”

Aaron’s eyes widened, nodding in understanding. “I’m prepared to do what it takes.”

“You wish to learn magic,” he said thoughtfully. “Then let us begin there. Since you still bear the name of this family, are you willing to accept knowledge and guidance from your brothers and sisters? Or would that go against the freedom you claim to value?”

“I won’t shy away from receiving help from others,” Aaron answered.

“Good,” Father remarked. “And how much do you currently know about magic?”

“Not much,” Aaron admitted. “But I’m learning.”

“Then allow me to share a tale—one that may serve you well,” Father began, his voice calm and composed. He gestured toward one of the murals on the wall. “In ages past, we were no different from the wild beasts that roamed the land. Tribes clashed over territory, wars broke out over resources, and food was stolen, squandered, and left to rot.”

Aaron nodded slowly.

“Magic, however, is the great equalizer,” Father continued, his voice taking on a mysterious lilt. “It exacts a toll not only on the body but on the soul as well, and both will grow from its use. The more resolute your soul, the greater your magical power tends to grow.”

“I see,” Aaron acknowledged.

“Despite the empire’s objections, our ancestors recognized magic’s potential. And when the time came for humanity to brave the sands and forge a new kingdom beyond them, it was magic that paved the way. After their triumphs, with the arcane arts finally permitted, a single formidable leader could rival the



might of an entire clan of magical beasts—or even the mystical forces that dwell within and beyond the desert.”

“Does that mean you’ll be teaching me?”

“Not exactly. The timing isn’t right,” he said, pressing a finger to the table. “Our family is in the midst of... an expansion, so I won’t be able to guide you directly. Instead, you’ll be enrolled in the Floating Academy’s upcoming term. That’s where your formal magical training will begin. Sylvia will brief you on the details.”

“A floating academy?” he repeated, unsure if he’d heard the words correctly, “Do you think that will be safe?”

“Indeed,” the man replied. “It’s one of the finest institutions for those who pursue magic—and one of the few places where even the heirs of the Great Houses can find true protection. You’ll find many paths to explore there. Which ones you choose will be yours alone, but know this: education is only part of why you’re going. The key to ending your exile lies within those halls.”

Aaron nodded silently along.

“This academy holds an annual competition among its students—the Grand Tournament,” he said, the name heavy with significance. “Your task is simple: win. Claim victory in the Grand Tournament, bring honor to the Aevum name, and I will end your exile.”

Sylvia, who had been attentively observing the entire interaction in silence, let out a slight laugh.

“I see your smirk, Sylvia,” he replied with a sense of bemusement. “Do not get too comfortable with my change in ruling.”

“Apologies,” she replied, trying to contain her growing smile.

Returning his attention to Aaron, Father continued. “The tournament will be a challenge unlike any other. It will test the magic you cultivate, and it will test your mind, body, and soul. Victory will not come easily.”

“I understand, but if that is my mission, then I will succeed. The Aevum will see victory,” Aaron said, determined.

The man gave a faint smirk—warmer than before. “It’s nice to see some conviction,” Father said, his gaze steady as he shifted the tone of the conversation. “Remember this: the name Aevum carries the weight of our history. As you walk through this world and beyond the walls of Trost, it may earn you allies... but just as easily, it may draw enemies.”

Heeding his steely gaze, Aaron closely followed his words.

“It will grant you power where you otherwise would not be deserving of it, but that power comes from respect, and respect is a currency traded equally between its vendors,” he continued. “Do your best for the name of the Aevum, and you’ll find that effort does not go unnoticed.”

Giving one final nod that lingered as a slight bow, Aaron acknowledged his conclusive statement. “Yes,” he clearly replied.



“You and the boy may go,” Father said to Sylvia, already turning back to his work. “Sylvia, I trust you’ll prepare him well for the Academy. And Aaron...” he glanced up one last time, “we’ll speak again once your mission is complete.”

Sylvia bowed before walking up to Father. “Before that, I have something to speak to you about.” She gestured for Aaron to leave, indicating the privacy of the matter, but he didn’t mind. He had found his answer, and he didn’t want to overstay his welcome and risk Father changing his mind.



CHAPTER NINE

Mana is the fuel of creation. Our bodies are the forges that give it use, our minds hold the technique honed over years of practice, and our souls determine the finished product.

— *Mastrov's Primer on Magical Anatomy*

Aaron's eyes snapped open, jolted awake by a resounding thud. A dull, throbbing ache bloomed in his temples as he slowly pushed himself up. He must've fallen asleep on one of the library couches while waiting for Sylvia. Judging by the hard floor beneath him, he'd rolled off in his sleep.

Groaning, he groggily shoved aside a warm blanket and blinked the blurriness from his eyes—only to find a familiar face smiling down at him.

"It seems you've returned to the land of the living," Sylvia remarked.

"Looks that way," Aaron grunted as he rose and stretched his aching muscles. The soreness that had plagued him appeared to have lessened somewhat. "What did you even put in my drink back then? The aftereffects are brutal, even after two days."

"A sedative," she replied smoothly, her expression almost unreadable. "One potent enough to bring down a beast of considerable size."

"A beast?" Aaron placed a hand over his chest, feigning offense. "I know we've had our differences, but you weren't planning to mount my head on a wall, were you?"

"Well," Sylvia said, her lips curving into a smirk as she tilted her head slightly. "Your body *does* have an irritating resistance to chemicals. It took some effort to find something strong enough to put you under, but I managed in the end."

"That's good to know," he said, dropping back down into the seat. "I'll be sure to ruin a few dinner parties with that talent."

Sylvia looked at him with evident satisfaction, like a child who had invented a new toy.

"So, how are you feeling?" Sylvia inquired, walking closer near him.

"Considerably better," Aaron replied with a nod of approval.

To his surprise, Sylvia sat down beside him and enveloped him in an embrace, offering solace and support. Sylvia's soft arm, like a comforting blanket, wrapped around Aaron's shoulder.

"Sorry," she said gently, "for earlier. The interrogation."

He wasn't fully sure how to react, but he didn't reject it. There was something nice about the moment that he didn't want to spoil.

"No worries," he assured. "I understand why you did it."

"Still, I'm sorry I couldn't trust you," Sylvia remarked. "I was under the impression you were truly my younger brother."

Aaron tilted his head, curious. "Not too fond of him?"

Sylvia's solemn expression revealed her true feelings. "Not particularly. He was always boastful—never one for formalities. He simply did as he pleased without a care for others," she sighed. "Mother always said that he would rise to his purpose one day, that all would be well. At first, her words were a mystery to me, but now I wonder if this is what she meant all along."

"Nah, probably not," Aaron shook his head. "I can't imagine she would've predicted this."

"Perhaps I'm overthinking her words," Sylvia chuckled softly.

"Could be," he shrugged. "But, you know, I'm glad to have a sister now—that sounds weird to say."

"Hmm," she mused. "You'll get used to it. You'd better, at least. You have three of them."

"Right," he laughed.

A lot had changed so suddenly, but it was a change he welcomed. He only hoped he could hold on to it long enough to fully appreciate it; he hoped he could live up to his family's expectations.

"I made sure to heal your wounds," Sylvia noted, indicating toward his hands.

Aaron glanced down at them. His body had a notoriously low pain tolerance, and the memory of having his fingernails forcefully ripped out was still fresh in his mind.

However, as he tentatively flexed his fingers, he was astonished to find that they were not only intact but completely pain-free. They had throbbed with pain only the day before, but now they felt fine. The bloody, dried-over nail beds had been restored, and they all looked as they did before.

"I'm guessing some sort of potion," he surmised. "Or medical magic?"

"Potions and medicines, yes," Sylvia coolly replied with a nod. "You can thank our many high-class alchemists for that. It's one of the many services we provide to the public."

"I see..." he nodded. "Amazing."



Aaron still wasn't thrilled about the experience of having his nails torn off—he'd never been in a situation where that was necessary—but the worst of it was over now. Sure, he'd undergone interrogation training before, it didn't quite compare to the real thing. Still, if it had to happen once, it seemed better in this world than the last.

"Is that something you're interested in learning about?" Sylvia asked.

"Potions?" Aaron considered. "Maybe. If you're offering, I'm willing to learn. More knowledge is always good."

Sylvia shook her head. "Not from me. I'm already drowning in work. I don't have the time to teach you," she paused, ruminating. "I suppose I could if I really pushed myself, I could... But if potions interest you, the academy will give you plenty of chances to learn."

"Oh, right," he realized, the thought resurfacing. "I wanted to ask about that."

"What do you wish to know?"

"This is an academy for magic, right?" Aaron prompted. "What level of magical proficiency do I need to be at before I go there?"

"Well, technically anyone—even with zero magical skills—could make it to the academy, as long as their accomplishments are recognized across the Human Empire," Sylvia explained. "Since you're part of the Aevum, getting in is practically a sure thing already. Still, having a grasp of the basics would be beneficial before you show up."

"Alright, I can do that," he assured her. *How hard could the basics be anyways?*

"I've set some things in motion for you," she nodded. "Soon, you'll make your way to the capital, Tenebris. Vendin will be your escort there, and once you arrive, the ferry will take you to where you need to go."

"Sounds like we're moving pretty fast," Aaron said with an exhalation, crossing his arms over his stomach. "Not that I'm opposed, but I was hoping to spend more time in the city—take a breather, you know? Trost seems interesting, and I wouldn't mind getting a better grasp of it before diving into academy life."

"Fair. More preparation would be ideal if we had the time." Her gaze sharpened slightly. "But the academy's orientation is time-sensitive. They only conduct rotations once a year—Tenebris is the final stop."

"Attending orientation is mandatory?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Sylvia said with a slight shrug. "Gaining access to the academy isn't just about getting the education. It also means becoming a citizen of the Floating City. And in the Floating City, certain customs matter more than you think. Best not to risk missing it, even with your name."

Aaron looked up toward the ceiling, running a hand through his hair. "An entire city that floats... Hard to wrap my head around that."

"You'll see for yourself soon enough." Sylvia's lips curved into a faint smile. "I remember my first time. It wasn't long ago, but somehow, those days already feel distant."



Aaron studied her for a moment. He considered asking more about her experience, but he let it pass for now. "And how exactly am I getting there?" he asked. "To Tenebris, I mean."

"Wagon," Sylvia said simply. "It's the safest option. If you leave in the dead of night, you'll avoid unwanted attention. Best to keep a low profile while traveling—the longer people assume you're still within our borders, the better."

"I assume you'll provide the transport."

"Of course," Sylvia replied, her tone matter-of-fact. "But it has to be through our partners. Anyone too close would raise suspicion. Plus, we can't let anyone know when you're leaving. We'd provide more direct support, but our family's resources are a bit... scattered at the moment."

"Got it," Aaron said, though the lack of clarity in his plans stung. Still, he understood the need for caution. "Just give me the rough timeline so I know when to be ready."

"Expect around a month," Sylvia vaguely responded. "In the meantime, Vendin will get you up to speed on the basics."

Aaron frowned, recalling the day before. "Speaking of which, we were supposed to continue my training yesterday."

"Ah, yes." Sylvia's eyes sparkled with amusement. "He did ask me why you never showed up."

Aaron raised an eyebrow. "And what did you tell him?"

Her lips curved into a sly smile. "I told him I hadn't the faintest idea."

"*Hah...*" Aaron sighed, realizing he would have to come up with an excuse himself.



"So," Vendin started. "Sylvia's informed me that you'll be attending the Floating Academy soon."

"Yeah." Aaron stretched his arms, warming up his body.

Vendin had tried to ask why Aaron missed training, but Aaron shot him a look that clearly said, 'Don't ask.' The unspoken understanding was clear: some things were better left untouched. And it seemed to have worked; Vendin hadn't pursued it further.

Aaron just hoped it would stay that way, because every excuse he'd brainstormed either sounded terrible or made him look even worse.

"Well, we've got a lot to cover in a short amount of time," Vendin stated.

"It's just the basics, right?"

"Correct, but even the basics have a lot of substance to them," he explained. "Train them well, and you'll find use for them even throughout the rest of your life."



“Of course,” Aaron nodded, reflecting on the initial lessons of his childhood training. Even across worlds, he found himself returning to them as a constant.

“Many folks from the old kingdoms don’t even progress beyond the basics,” Vendin remarked, catching Aaron by surprise. “Although basic magic is becoming the norm in some areas, most simply don’t see the necessity. For those aspiring to be adventurers, it’s a must, but beyond that, life went on fine without it for hundreds of years.”

“Right, magic was banned until about a century ago,” Aaron recalled. “Tradition is tough to forget, I guess.”

“When it comes to the old kingdoms, that’s often the case. They have great pride in their grip on power, and because of that, they are cautious of change,” Vendin agreed, walking over to a nearby bag and picking it up. “Anyway, for today’s lesson, we’ll focus on introducing you to the four techniques that form the foundation of Circle One: the basics.”

Reaching into one of the bag’s pockets, he pulled out two small orbs, barely larger than marbles, and placed one in each hand, holding them palm up.

“Take a look at each of these,” Vendin instructed. “Can you spot a difference between them? Feel free to get a closer look.”

Aaron moved closer to Vendin and examined the beads that rested in the center of each of his palms. They were smooth as glass, emitting a slight sheen as the sunlight bounced off them, producing a teal luster. He attempted to identify any difference in size or material, but the two appeared identical based on their looks alone.

“They’re the same,” Aaron concluded.

“So it would appear,” he smiled. “However, here is where the first technique of magic, Insight, comes into play. What if I told you that one of these orbs didn’t exist?”

“Huh?” he blinked his eyes, unsure of how to respond to his question. “In what way?”

“One of these is an illusion,” Vendin elaborated, clearly enjoying seeing the look of confusion on Aaron’s face. “Come. See for yourself.” He lowered one of his hands and stretched out the other closer to Aaron.

An illusion?

Reaching his hand towards the ball, he went to grab it. But as Aaron closed his fingers around the object, it disappeared, his hand closing into an empty fist. It took him a second to process what had just happened.

“If you had employed Insight, the skill of mana perception, you would’ve been able to see that the illusion was crafted entirely from mana.” Vendin closed his eyes for a moment, and upon reopening them, a subtle tinge of blue light appeared beneath his irises—barely noticeable but still present. “Concentrate mana into your eyes, and like recognizing color, you can discern its distinctive radiance.”



“Interesting,” Aaron mused, considering its potential much like an infrared sight. It seemed magic had the ability to deceive the senses, making Insight invaluable for detecting any tricks mages might employ in battle. Speculating on its use further, a thought clicked into place. “So, can you use it to easily spot people?”

“If they are outputting enough mana, or your Insight is focused well enough, it’s possible,” Vendin confirmed. “But mana can be found hidden in many places, from traps to toxins. Train your Insight, and you can see danger before it strikes.”

Aaron nodded, understanding the broad scope of its functionality.

“Building on top of what Insight offers is the next technique of Circle One: Foresight,” he said, tapping his forehead to capture Aaron’s attention. A brilliant ring of blue energy materialized on his temple, briefly illuminating the area before fading away. “By flooding your mind with mana, you can heighten your mental awareness, enhancing your perception of your surroundings. It increases your vision and sensitivity to movement, and it can even boost your reaction time, essentially slowing down how you perceive time.”

Vendin handed him the ball that remained in his other hand and took a step back.

“Here, try to trick me,” he challenged Aaron, crossing his arms and calmly placing his now slightly bluer eyes on him. “Switch the balls around, and I will try to guess which hand.”

Aaron smirked, confident despite Vendin’s purportedly enhanced perception. “Alright.”

Rolling the ball between his hands, he switched it back and forth, moving his closed fists erratically. At the right moment, he slyly pocketed the marble with a loose catch of his tunic. This was something he had practiced many times before—pickpocketing and misdirection.

“There,” Vendin immediately pointed to its location as Aaron continued to act like he was still moving it, stopping him instantly.

“Huh. Impressive,” he conceded defeat, retrieving the ball and tossing it back to him.

“I’ll give it to you, it was a good effort,” Vendin admitted. “But a simple enough task to decipher with decent Foresight.”

He then strode over to a nearby training dummy, snatching it up and planting it in front of Aaron with a resounding thud.

“Next is Strengthening,” he declared, holding out his hand. “Picture a tree inside your body. Your Mana Core is the wellspring of your abilities, and your circuits, veins, and muscles are like the branches of that tree. By spreading magic from your core throughout your body, you can enhance its strength.”

Vendin assumed a loose stance and placed his hand on the target dummy’s chest. “Ready?” he asked. With a moment of focus, he delivered a light push with



his palm. To Aaron's shock, the dummy hurtled through the air like a cannonball, crashing down over twenty meters in a slam.

The impact sent shockwaves through the air.

"Well, damn," Aaron shuddered, realizing that one blow from Vendin would be enough to kill him. "Now I can see where Foresight could come in handy."

"Yes, but hold on," Vendin interjected. "Let me pose a scenario to you. Picture yourself in a duel where your opponent is moving at an inhuman speed. You know their attack is coming, but you can't match or evade their lightning-fast movements, even with Strengthening or Foresight. What do you do to avoid certain defeat?"

"Well, I wouldn't just stand there and accept the attack," he said, his hand tightening into a fist. "Ideally, I'd find a way to turn the attacker's speed against him. If I couldn't dodge the attack, then I'd use my own body as a weapon—maybe I'd sacrifice a limb or two if it meant I could land a decisive blow."

Vendin raised an eyebrow, impressed by Aaron's resolve. "That's quite a bold strategy," he said, "but remember, the body is sacred, especially to a mage. Lose a limb, and it's like losing branches on a tree. Techniques you normally use with it lose their edge."

"Right," Aaron replied. "So I need a way to defend against those attacks."

"Precisely. That brings us to the final technique: Tempering."

With a sharp clap, Vendin erupted in blinding blue light, crackling with power that made the air hum. The radiance pulsed like a heartbeat, vibrating the ground beneath him. As the light faded, he stood before Aaron, calm and composed.

"Tempering is a technique that surrounds your body with raw magical energy," he explained. "It's the most challenging of the four techniques, but it is also the most valuable. By using this technique, you can absorb and dampen the impact of any attack, allowing you to counter any manner of assault if used correctly. But be warned, there is always a cost."

Aaron's eyes narrowed as he listened. "I'm guessing it takes a great deal of mana to maintain," he said, raising an eyebrow.

"Your intuition serves you well," Vendin acknowledged, nodding in agreement. "Tempering exacts a toll not only on your physical body but on your magical reserves as well, and the same can be said for all of the Circle One techniques. Active use of them will restrict how much mana you have left to use on other techniques or spells. If you don't train them well, they can consume a large proportion of your mana for little benefit."

"But if I master say Tempering well enough, then I could maintain a decent defense, even at a low expenditure," he speculated.

"Correct, though 'master' is the key word here," Vendin highlighted, releasing his abilities.



“So, theoretically, I could allocate a third of my available mana to keep a moderate level of Tempering and Strengthening active, leaving me with the rest to spend on other uses?” Aaron proposed, making sure he understood the idea fully.

“Yes, that’s right,” he confirmed. “Be warned, though, Tempering won’t completely stop attacks from hurting you. It’ll reduce the damage you take, but unless the Tempering you use is stronger than the attack you receive, you’re still going to feel something when it hits you.”

“That makes sense,” Aaron nodded.

“So, you understand all of them?” Vendin inquired. “Need me to repeat any of them or give any more examples?”

Aaron shook his head. “Nope. I’ve got it.”

“*Hmph*,” he nodded, impressed. “Alright then. Now it’s time to put it into practice.”

Vendin gestured for Aaron to stand close, aligning them in mirrored stances.

“You’ve got me excited to get started,” Aaron said, cracking his neck, eager to begin working with magic.

“I won’t disappoint,” Vendin replied with a smile. He raised his hand to Aaron’s face. “Close your eyes,” he instructed.

Aaron hesitated a moment, unsure of what he was doing exactly, but complied. He felt the light touch of Vendin’s fingers meeting with his eyelids.

And then a small flash.

An energy washed throughout his eyes, flooding them like steam in a glass. He found it difficult to describe the sensation, but he felt more alert. It was like the prickle of chilly air, only the feeling grew warm and comforting as he quickly adapted to it.

“Open,” Vendin instructed.

His eyes snapped open, and before him was a familiar sight. There stood Vendin with his hands up, each holding what appeared to be a small, teal orb. It was the same scenario as before, but this time, there was something different.

“Left hand,” Aaron quickly answered, pointing at the object that clearly shone with a luminance incomparable to the other.

“Very nicely done,” Vendin confirmed, dropping his left hand and making the ball disappear. As it vanished from his sight, Aaron observed the mana that comprised it dissipate, fading away as if it were never there to begin with.

Using his new Insight, Aaron scanned the surroundings, faint traces of mana flickering across the manor’s outer areas, growing stronger as they neared him. Blinking in disbelief, he realized the entire manor was teeming with magical defenses.

“I’m surprised you’ve kept it going for this long,” Vendin praised, “Most people struggle to hold Insight for even a short time when they first use it.”

“I thought this was your mana.”



"It was at first, but that was just to help you feel it," he explained. "This is all you."

Now that he mentioned it, Aaron could notice the toll maintaining the Insight was costing him. A mild strain began to accumulate in his eyes, so he allowed the feeling to fade from them. As it left him, so did his perception of the mana around him, and his vision returned to normal once again.

"Try it again," Vendin suggested. "This time on your own."

Aaron nodded and closed his eyes, searching to replicate the sensation. It took him about a minute to grasp it again, but eventually, the mana poured into his sight once more.

"Very impressive," Vendin said, a hint of approval in his tone as Aaron reopened his eyes. "It usually takes days of focused training to reproduce this level of Insight."

"What can I say? I guess I'm naturally talented," he replied smugly.

"I won't deny that," Vendin admitted, stepping closer and placing his hand on Aaron's forehead. "But before you get cocky, let's see how you handle Foresight."



Sweat poured down Aaron's face as he struggled against the immense pressure harring his mind. His left arm clutched his right, attempting to keep it in place as he gritted his teeth against the searing pain. His head and muscles burned with the intensity of hot lava, but he refused to give up. Concentrating intensely, he channeled all his willpower into the task at hand, determined to succeed no matter what.

"Alright, that'll be enough," Vendin commanded, and Aaron released his grip with a gasp. He staggered backward, his body trembling with exhaustion.

"The output is there, but control is lacking," Vendin scolded solemnly, clearly disappointed with Aaron's performance. "Focus the mana in your mind."

"Show it to me again," Aaron requested, wincing at his own ineptitude.

He had never expected to be scolded by someone else in his lifetime, yet here he was. The last time he had been scolded was by his mentor, and that had been a couple of years ago. Vendin was patient, but Aaron couldn't seem to grasp the feeling of Foresight despite being shown it many times. This required immense effort and focus, and it frustrated Aaron to no end.

Vendin lifted his hand and gestured for Aaron to stop. "Try to imagine drinking hot water," he instructed. "As the hot water slides down your throat, you feel the heat spreading throughout your body, but you don't know the exact pinpoint of where the water is. The water will have already traveled downwards before you feel the heat. Find when that heat reaches your mind."

Aaron nodded, determined to grasp Vendin's analogy.



He closed his eyes, plunging himself into the imagined scenario. Gradually, he began to sense a similar feeling as he summoned his mana once more. Although still challenging to control, he could perceive the energy coursing through him with greater precision and restraint than before.

But then he lost it again.

"Too forceful," Vendin replied. "Let it flow through."

Aaron tried again, this time focusing on the flow rather than forcing the energy. His breaths slowed as he allowed the magic to move within him, less frantic and more fluid. The pressure built, but he held it steady, allowing the current of energy to settle.

"That's it," Vendin said. "You're starting to get it."

But just like the last time, it slipped out of his grasp.

Aaron sat, frustrated at himself, and considering an alternative approach, he decided to switch tactics. If he couldn't focus on the feeling, he would remove everything else until only the feeling remained.

Once more, Aaron closed his eyes and took a deep breath, consciously relaxing his muscles. He focused all his attention on his mind, trying to block out all other distractions like a state of meditation. It was difficult at first, but he slowly started to sense the flow of energy within him again. He could feel it pulsing through his circuits as he focused it into his head, a river of mana lighting up his synapses.

"Come on..." Aaron thought, urging himself to concentrate harder. The sensation was at the precipice, but it needed a little push farther. He needed to let that feeling grow.

As Aaron focused on the indescribable tenderness, it swelled stronger and more responsive, almost as if it had a mind of its own. He clung to it, letting it spread until it engulfed his thoughts completely, and as it took over his mind, Aaron experienced a strange dissociation, becoming more aware of his body and its many processes.

The strain weighed heavily on Aaron; his eyes twitched involuntarily, his breathing grew erratic, and his body teetered on the brink of collapse. Yet he remained resolute, unwilling to relinquish that sensation, determined not to surrender.

And then, suddenly, it was over.

The tenderness faded away, leaving him feeling drained but also exhilarated.

"Alright, stop." Vendin tapped Aaron's back with a firm hand.

Aaron's eyes flew open, and he realized he was drenched in a chilling sweat. "Did it work?" he asked, his hope palpable.

"Mhm. Actually, your technique was quite good," Vendin said, scratching his chin. "It took a while for you to get there, but once the mana started to gather, it moved faster than I expected. There's still some work to be done, but it's a solid leap for now."



"How long was I focusing?" Aaron asked, shaking his head in confusion.

"At least ten minutes," Vendin replied with a measured tone.

Ten minutes?

"Wait, that's impossible," Aaron protested, certain that he had been concentrating for no more than a few moments.

But he recalled what Vendin had told him.

Had his perception of time been distorted?

Merely smirking at his response, Vendin pressed on. "Alright, now perform it with your eyes open," he commanded.

"Sure," Aaron complied. His body was exhausted, but the thrill was more than enough to keep him going.

Aaron shifted himself into a comfortable position and began to focus once more. This time, more familiar with the sensation, he was able to collect his mana more effortlessly. He concentrated as the energy filled him, and he perceived in himself the color of golden yellow, prompting a thought as the technique stabilized.

"Does my mana look... yellow?" he asked, curious if his suspicion was correct.

"Yes it does," Vendin confirmed.

Pondering, Aaron considered the possible meaning of the color, distinct from Vendin's signature light blue aura. Unable to conclude an answer, he simply asked, "Is there a reason?"

"Well, maybe. Nobody really knows for sure," Vendin shrugged. "Magic users from the same family often share similar colors, but that isn't always the case, and it's even been observed to change over the course of a person's life."

"Huh, interesting," Aaron mused.

"Alright, final test," Vendin continued on with a question of his own. "Are you ready?"

Confused, Aaron replied, "Ready for what?"

In an instant, Vendin's body closed in on him.

He was going to hit him.

The realization came immediately, Aaron's eyes hypervigilant of every shift in Vendin's movements, but his body lagged behind. Then, the punch slammed into his chest with full force. The twist in Vendin's arm sent Aaron spinning backwards in a dizzying, circular motion, hurtling through the air at alarming speed.

Despite the violent impact, Aaron managed to land on his feet, though it was far from graceful, and the wind was completely knocked out of him.

"A bit of extra warning might've been nice," Aaron barely got out, coughing as he caught his breath. "Would it have killed you to give me a heads-up?"

"It wouldn't be much of a test if you saw it coming," Vendin replied with a hint of amusement. "Besides, I wanted to see if you had the reaction time to block the attack."

Aaron grunted, still recovering from the blow. "Barely."



"A better level of Foresight would've let you catch it sooner," he stated matter-of-factly.

"I don't think I'm quite there yet," Aaron concluded, still rubbing his chest where he had been hit. "That was Strengthening, wasn't it? You could have killed me."

Vendin shrugged nonchalantly. "If you die, you die."

"Seriously?" he exclaimed.

"Well, I had a feeling you'd be fine, but I held back enough that if my attack had caused any serious injuries, you'd still be alive to recover. We are at the Aevum Estate, after all." Vendin reassured him. "You lack control, but your mana output is abnormally high for your level of skill. It leaked to other parts of your body while you engaged your Foresight."

Aaron reassessed the state of his body, and considering the force of the attack, he was surprised he wasn't in worse condition. He prodded his chest for damage. It exhibited a lingering, throbbing sting, but nothing seemed broken.

"Essentially, you pulled off a rudimentary form of Tempering," Vendin simply explained.

"Sounds like I'm ahead of the curve," Aaron dusted himself off, starting to walk back over to Vendin.

"A bit, but you've still got a long way to go," he criticized. "You can't rely on volume to compensate for a deficiency of focus. Before even thinking about training your Tempering, you need to master Foresight."

"Yeah, I can see why," he responded as soreness began to set in all-throughout his body and mind, the stockpiled effect of their training hitting him all at once.

"It's crucial to train all aspects of your body," Vendin emphasized. "A magical duel can happen at any moment. With irregular timings and inhuman reactions, you'll need to be ready to activate Tempering and Foresight at a moment's notice. Even better, you'd want them active while you're awake to reduce the risk of being caught off guard."

"Active the whole time?" Aaron asked, physically averse to the prospect considering the toll he had taken in mere minutes.

"You'll get better at it," he guaranteed, assuaging Aaron's doubt. "Let's take a short break. Recover your energy. We've got a lot more practice ahead of us."



CHAPTER TEN

Two blades at your side may seem like a formidable weapon, but true power lies in mastering the single blade before seeking to wield another.

— *Exoren Tactical Vol I*

Trost was especially bustling during this time of the year, and Teigen understood that more than most of his Redwind counterparts. That was why he took on the majority of his external jobs during then, allowing himself to rest during the winter.

Most jobs in Trost were centered around subjugation, with only a few focusing on gathering. While many favored the former, Teigen preferred the latter. Gathering and supply tasks suited him well, as he excelled at navigating those situations.

That didn't mean he ignored combat, though. His skills had sharpened through relentless overnight training, earning him a reputation for taking on more challenging missions. Often, he'd serve as the scout, ensuring his team had a clear gauge of their surroundings, opponents, and everything in between. But after completing a long assignment, he decided it was time for a well-earned break.

The Redwind Mess Hall, situated east of the Redwind Headquarters, was crowded with a multitude of recruits. Among them were the typical faces one would expect in an organization of this nature: children rescued from poverty, beginning life anew within the order, alongside wandering newcomers eager to embark on their first missions as contracted aid.

The food they provided was decent—not terrible, but with more funds, Teigen could've easily found better options elsewhere rather than relying on the standard fare the Redwind offered to everyone.

As Teigen got his food, he noticed an individual sitting at the back alone.

"Odd," he thought aloud. People here tended to stick together, at least in a group of two at the bare minimum. So Teigen decided to join him.

“Yo,” he waved to get their attention. They saw him gesture but looked around themselves, clearly unsure if Teigen was actually waving at him or someone else. Meeting his gaze and giving him a nod, Teigen raised his hand again as he approached, carrying his food in the other.

“You’re new here, huh?” Teigen extended his hand. “Name’s Teigen.”

The man stared blankly at Teigen’s outstretched palm for a couple seconds before shaking it with a small smile. “Michael,” he said.

“Want something to eat?” Teigen asked. “I don’t usually buy food for others, but I feel like you could use it.”

“That obvious?” he barely laughed.

“The new recruits never have enough O-Shards to get even basic stuff,” he explained, gesturing toward his clothes. “And I can tell based on your uniform.”

Michael looked down, “Oh.”

“So, how long have you been here?” Teigen inquired. “This is my fifth year. Only five more to go, give or take.”

“I’ve only been here a little over a month,” Michael replied. “I’ve been doing alright.”

“We help each other out here,” Teigen stated, reaching into his back pocket.

He produced a couple of slender, crimson square coins—O-Shards, the official currency of Redwind earned as compensation for completing tasks assigned by the order. They could be used for services or goods in any Redwind establishment or to pay off their debt to the order quicker. Here in Trost, however, members of the order had the additional option to use them on certain authorized items and services provided by the Aevum, as they often operated in collaboration.

To those with nowhere to go, the Redwind offered hospitality, life skills, physical training, magical knowledge, and community. But in return, a ten-year service commitment was required.

While many considered the service contract lengthy, Teigen thought it fair. Most recruits were young, mainly in their teens, who without the Redwind’s intervention likely wouldn’t have survived even another year, much less ten. Teigen had joined a bit older than most, but regardless of how much of his life he spent there, he was dedicated to paying off his debt no matter what.

Michael’s eyes widened at the sight of the coins, his hand slowly reaching over to them before stopping to ask, “Are you sure?”

“I’ve got a soft spot for people in need,” Teigen smirked. “Besides, you never know, you may turn out to become someone important. Can’t have you go starving now, can I?”

Teigen held the coins out closer, insistent, but Michael’s hand still only hovered over them, unsure whether or not to accept.

“Look, do you want help or not?” Teigen asked.

“I won’t have to pay you back, will I?” Michael said skeptically.



Teigen snorted. “C’mon, man. Like I said, we help each other out here. Redwind runs on teamwork. Trust me, you don’t wanna be on a subjugation quest solo.”

“A... Alright,” he nodded, taking the shards gratefully.

Teigen smiled and leaned in, about to suggest some good food options, but he stopped himself as a hushed whisper rippled through the mess hall.

The hall’s typical ambience quickly faded, and Teigen sensed the approaching footsteps behind him, slow and deliberate.

“Teigen,” the voice was low and familiar—an Elder Redwind.

A chill ran down his spine.

Slowly, he turned. “Vendin,” he carefully nodded. “It’s uh— good to see you.”

“You’re needed,” Vendin plainly said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

“Ah, well...” he sighed. “But I just finished my missions. Can’t I get a couple of days to rest first?”

“It wasn’t a request,” Vendin said, his voice firm.

Teigen arched a brow. “Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Man~!” Teigen groaned. “I’ve been working my ass off. Let me have a break every now and then. I can help out the new recruits or something. Didn’t you get to do that back in the day?”

Vendin remained unfazed. “Unfortunately, you happen to be the perfect fit for this job.” He paused before adding with a smirk, “Besides, it’s not like you do much anyway—mostly gathering supplies and lounging around.”

“Hey, gathering is crucial!” Teigen shot back. “The herbs I collect keep people in Trost alive. That’s more important than chasing monsters down south.”

“Hunting those monsters stops them from raiding the city,” Vendin countered, folding his arms. “Let’s just say your contributions are... lower on the ladder.”

Teigen huffed. “Yeah, yeah... whatever you say.” He ran a hand through his hair, already resigned. “Alright, what do you need?”

Vendin smirked. “Your magical training started a while ago, yes? There’s someone I need you to spar with.”

“Right...” Teigen narrowed his eyes, “and why me, again?”

“You just happen to fit the bill,” he simply replied. “Besides, you’ve always wanted a decent partner to spar with, haven’t you?”

“Funny you mention that, because I *just* found one.” He gestured toward Michael. “So, as much as I’d *love* to accept your offer, that position’s already filled.”

Vendin’s gaze flicked up slightly toward the new recruit. “Do you know this guy?” he asked Michael.

“Uh...” Michael blinked. “Nope. Never seen him in my life.”

Vendin’s eyes shot back toward Teigen, unimpressed. “Seems like your sparring partner has never even heard of you. That’s a little odd, don’t you think?”



“Hey, all relationships gotta start somewhere,” he replied. “I was just about to convince him to learn magic with me.”

“You’re going to have to try harder than that.”

Teigen glanced at Michael, who was now looking awkwardly around the room. “See? He’s considering it.”

Michael, caught off guard, stammered, “Uh, actually, I was just...” Slowly and casually, he started inching away from Teigen as if he had other business to attend to.

“Seems like your persuasive skills still need work,” Vendin ridiculed.

Teigen shrugged dramatically. “Hey, even the best have their off days.”

Vendin gave Michael an approbating nod, and the new recruit wasted no time slipping away from the table.

Kids these days... so ungrateful. Teigen sighed, shaking his head. Not that he blamed him—getting caught up in trouble this early on probably wasn’t on Michael’s to-do list.

With a sigh, Teigen stood up asking, “Who do you need me to spar with anyway?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Vendin replied. “I’ll even sweeten the deal. I’ll get a couple months knocked off of your debt.”

“Yeah?” Teigen raised an eyebrow, considering a moment more. “Alright, alright. Just don’t ask me for something like this again. Seriously,” he conceded.



Aaron reclined in his comfortable chair as the sizable carriage rumbled to a stop in front of Aevum Estate. To his surprise, Vendin was right on time. He had mentioned having something to attend to before their training that day, so Aaron expected him to arrive later than usual, but that wasn’t the case.

Stepping out of the carriage, Vendin was accompanied by another individual. This newcomer was tall with brown hair and a physique similar to Aaron’s own. Sipping his lemonade, Aaron observed as the two made their way through the gates toward him.

“Looks like you’re having a good day,” Vendin remarked.

“Just waiting on you,” Aaron responded. “By the way, I’ve got a few things on my mind.”

He gestured toward a table adorned with stacks of books. Although he had delved into some volumes on the history of the Asteria, Third Kingdom, most didn’t talk about anything that Aaron found particularly interesting. One, however, did spark his intrigue, as it covered a range of information about the Redwind Order that Aaron knew Vendin was a part of.



From the book, Aaron learned that the alliance between Aevum and Redwind ran deep. Although they were mainly based in Callow, his family had provided the Redwind with ample opportunities to expand their influence, with their Trost division being nearly as large as their main headquarters. In return, the Redwind assisted them through manpower and trade with other cities, solidifying their partnership.

“Learning a bit about Redwind history, I see,” Vendin remarked.

“Mhm,” Aaron nodded, rising from his seat. “But we can discuss that later. Who’s joining us today?”

Teigen, who had been standing patiently behind Vendin, raised his hand. “I’m Teigen. I’ve been part of the order for about five years. I have a grasp of the basics of Circle One magic, so Vendin thought I’d be useful in assisting you, esteemed noble Aaron.” Teigen bowed respectfully, cautious not to give offense. Teigen understood that a single word from Aevum could jeopardize his life.

“Yeah, yeah,” Aaron replied with a casual wave. “No need for honorifics or to be overly respectful—I’m not about that. Just be yourself.”

Teigen shot a quick glance at Vendin who nodded in approval.

“Thank goodness,” Teigen sighed, his shoulders slumping in relief. “If that’s the deal, could you tell Vendin to keep me out of stuff like this? He didn’t tell me I’d be fighting against an Aevum!”

“Well, you heard the man, Vendin,” Aaron replied. “Should we let him go?”

Vendin gave a slight bow, the gesture respectful but laced with the slightest edge of mockery given their history. “He was the only one who matched the description of someone at your current level. Most skilled Redwind are typically stationed closer to Tenebris.”

Teigen shot him a look. “I can hear you, you know.”

“Well, it looks like you’ll be with us a bit longer, Teigen,” Aaron shrugged, standing up from his chair. “The sparring arena is ready.”

Vendin trailed behind Aaron as they entered the field, and to his surprise, it was exceptionally tidy. While the maids typically maintained it well-enough, this time it was particularly spotless. There was no evidence of prior use whatsoever, leaving it almost suspiciously pristine, as if someone had expertly erased any traces.

“Woah,” Teigen exclaimed, his eyes wide with disbelief. He walked the perimeter for a bit, taking it all in. “This is way better than anything the Redwind have set up.”

Eventually, he made his way over to a group of large stone slabs secured in metal braces. Tapping them with his knuckles, he turned to Vendin to ask, “Why don’t we have something like this?”

“Trust me, you don’t have the power to break through those,” Vendin chuckled. “In the city, probably only the Aevum family could shatter a barrier of this strength.”

Teigen swallowed, “I see... And you want me to go up against *him*?”



“He’s only been studying magic for a couple weeks,” Vendin reassured. “And, of course, everything that occurs here must remain confidential.”

Teigen nodded promptly, well aware that any leak of information could cost him his life. Just gaining entry to the Aevum Estate was farther than most ever got. Even the slightest detail, whether it was about the layout or the number of guards and staff, had value to the right people. While Teigen had gotten used to paying attention to stuff like that, he hesitated to now.

Aaron and Teigen moved to their respective sides of the circle, and Vendin stepped forward to moderate the battle. The rules were simple: best of three, no weapons, and everything else was fair game.

Teigen took his position, exhaling slowly. The atmosphere shifted, growing noticeably more serious.

Quickly settling into his stance, Aaron wasted no time. This was his first real sparring session against someone other than Vendin, and he wasn’t about to let himself falter. Drawing on his Insight and Foresight, he activated both abilities, focused and determined to make the most of this challenge.

“Nope!” Teigen said, holding his hands out in front of him and taking a couple steps back. “I’m genuinely at risk of dying here, Vendin! How did you talk me into this?!”

Vendin smirked and glanced at Aaron. “He’s ready.”

Aaron gave a slight nod.

Teigen threw his hands up in exasperation. “Look, I’ll do anything else, just not this! C’mon, how about—”

Unfazed, Vendin began the count. “Three... Two...”

Teigen shot him a look. “Damn it—I want years, not—!”

“Go!” Vendin bellowed, cutting him off mid-sentence.

Teigen knew he didn’t have a choice now, but since the count had been early, he at least had a small window of opportunity.

He lunged at Aaron with impressive speed, overoptimistic that he might’ve been able to end this within seconds. But by the time he closed the distance, Aaron had already activated his Strengthening to match his pace. Aaron blocked the initial jab with his right hand, seizing the moment to counter. Teigen, quick on his feet, evaded the strike and retaliated with a sharp right kick.

Surprisingly, the kick landed squarely on Aaron, but it lacked sufficient force. Teigen clicked his tongue and quickly put some distance between them.

Aaron, noticing a misalignment in Teigen’s stance, adjusted his strategy. Blitzing in close, he delivered a precise jab to Teigen’s abdomen, prompting Teigen to retreat once again. He pressed forward, feinting left before slamming his forearm against Teigen’s guard, testing his defenses. In return, Teigen gritted his teeth and swung low, aiming for Aaron’s ribs, but Aaron twisted out of the way, narrowly avoiding the blow.



Then, countering with a sharp kick, Aaron sent Teigen stumbling back, creating a momentary imbalance. Aaron lunged in to exploit the vulnerability, but Teigen quickly recovered, deflecting the strike and again withdrawing to regaining distance.

They circled each other slowly. Aaron maintained his distance, opting for a defensive strategy.

“Damn, how do I get close?” Teigen thought. He felt the pressure of Aaron’s combat skills with each movement. The farther back he stepped, the more space he gave up—something he couldn’t afford in this limited arena. But, his mind and body now fully engaged, he pressed on. Teigen attempted various combinations of attacks, but Aaron skillfully parried each strike.

As the fight progressed, Aaron began to notice a peculiarity in Teigen’s attacks: they lacked the strength and precision he would expect from a seasoned fighter.

“So that’s all you’ve got?” Aaron inquired.

Teigen clicked his tongue. *“He knows,”* he thought. While Teigen had decent skill in close combat, he primarily relied on speed over power, either to try to end the battle quickly or to create an opening to escape. But now, it seemed that Aaron was using that against him, and he was being pushed to defense. The battle wouldn’t end itself though, and if Teigen couldn’t run, he needed a new strategy.

Closing in on his opponent again, Aaron noticed him adjust his stance and ramp up his Strengthening, and then he understood what the goal of this trial was.

Tempering.

He’d been working on controlling it over the past few days, and now it seemed his endurance would be tested. Aaron darted his head around to follow Teigen’s movements, but they were too predictable—he didn’t even need Foresight.

It gradually dawned more on Aaron that Teigen wasn’t as skilled as he’d originally presumed. Compared to Vendin, the difference was night and day. Perhaps he was merely a scout for the Redwind, or something similar.

After about ten minutes into the sparring session, Aaron sensed that his opponent was gradually tiring. Aaron blocked his attacks with increasing ease, and he could notice the weakening resolve behind the man’s movements. Yet, despite that, the man still pressed on, and so did Aaron.

Eventually, clearly attempting to catch his breath, Teigen interrupted the battle with a question. “Why aren’t you taking the offensive?” he asked, the weariness in his words evident.

But Aaron ignored his inquiry—it was meaningless anyway. Instead, he returned with one of his own. “Are you one of the stronger members of the Redwind?”

“Yeah, good one,” Teigen smirked nervously, shaking his head. “I’ll probably be a High Redwind in a few years.”



"And Vendin?" Aaron continued. "What rank is he?"

"Elder," Teigen replied. "Three ranks higher than my current standing."

"I see," Aaron thought. "And is he among the best of the Redwind?"

Teigen gave a puzzled look but replied nonetheless. "If he wanted, he'd be one of the top candidates to take over the Trost division."

"Then I guess you have a long road ahead of you," Aaron smirked. "Now stop wasting time."

Gritting his teeth, Teigen couldn't help but wonder how Aaron was so strong after only two weeks of learning magic. He simply couldn't believe it.

The battle raged on, but no matter how Teigen adjusted his approach, changing angles and shifting timings, nothing worked. It was as if Aaron could see his moves before they happened. Foresight was useful, but it alone couldn't pull something like that off, which meant Aaron was more than just perceptive—he was experienced. And the harder Teigen tried and failed to break the pattern, the more obvious that fact became.

A growing sense of dread overwhelmed Teigen as the realization set in—he was outmatched in every way.

"Alright," he conceded, frustration evident in his tiring voice. "I give up."

"Oh?" Aaron cocked his head to the side. "Come on, you've still got a bit left in you. You're supposed to be helping me, aren't you?"

Teigen couldn't understand Aaron's nonchalant attitude. It felt like he wasn't even taking the fight seriously, and if that was the case, he *really* never stood a chance.

Gasping for air as the fatigue finally hit him, Teigen shook his head. "Nah..." he panted, raising his hands in defeat. "I'm beat."

Teigen glanced at Vendin, trying to read the thoughts off of his face, but he couldn't tell a thing. For his poor performance, maybe he wouldn't get the months taken off he'd been promised after all, but there was nothing he could do about it—he simply couldn't go on. But he wasn't too disheartened by the outcome. At least he wasn't dead... yet.

"Hm," Aaron looked at him with a blank stare before shrugging. "Well, Vendin, it looks like we're done here."

"It seems so," Vendin agreed. "The battle is concluded. Congrats, Aaron, you win."

With a relieved sigh, Teigen bowed to Aaron and turned to leave, but Aaron stopped him with an outstretched hand. Teigen paused, surprised, and he studied the hand warily.

Was it a trap of some kind?

He remained cautious, but ultimately, he shook it—after all, the last thing Teigen wanted was to disrespect Aaron.

"Thanks for the match," Aaron said. "You've got some solid ability, but your power could use some work."



“Th-thank you,” Teigen nodded, humbled. “I apologize for not being better.”

As Aaron concluded his brief exchange with Teigen, a slow clap coming from the edge of the area greeted him. “Seems like you’re picking things up quite nicely,” Sylvia remarked.

Aaron spun around at the sound of her voice.

She wore something between a nightgown and pajamas paired with little white slippers shaped like a... puffball? Some kind of animal? Whatever it was, he couldn’t quite tell.

But when had she arrived?

He hadn’t noticed her at all during the fight.

While Aaron stood there contemplating her sudden appearance, beside him, Teigen’s face drained of all color. He choked on his breath, his body moving before his mind could process the words, and he dropped to his knees in a bow. “E-esteemed Sylvia,” he stammered. “It’s my pleasure.”

Sylvia let out a soft, amused laugh, as if pleasantly surprised by the display. “Oh, there’s no need for that. You did well yourself,” she said, her tone light but carrying an undeniable authority. “Stand up. Vendin will take you back.”

Teigen swallowed hard. “Of course. Thank you,” he said without hesitation, nodding rapidly before bowing again for good measure. Without another word, he turned and left, escorted to the gates by a maid.

Vendin, composed, gave Sylvia a moderate bow. “Well, I’ll leave you two to catch up,” he said smoothly. “See you tomorrow,” he nodded at Aaron. Then, without waiting for a response, he turned and departed, leaving Aaron alone with her.

“Alright,” Aaron waved. “Have a good day.”

There was a pause as they both left, but once Aaron’s gaze returned to her, Sylvia asked, “So, how did the battle feel?”

Aaron shrugged. “He was... alright. Nothing too special.”

She smiled faintly, her tone light but with an edge of amusement. “I hear he’s actually one of the Redwind’s most promising scouts. Not particularly strong in combat or magic, but he’s resourceful.”

Aaron mulled it over for a moment. “He’s got potential—good instincts. But...” he paused, contemplating some more. “I dunno. The whole thing felt more like a warm-up than an actual challenge.”

“To be fair, your progress has been remarkably quick,” she said. “I’m impressed with how far you’ve come in such a short time.”

“No need for flattery,” Aaron scratched his head modestly. “I’m only barely starting to get the hang of Tempering, and my Strengthening is still rough.”

Sylvia smirked. “Don’t humble yourself too much. Take a guess at how long *he’s* been training,” she prompted.

He thought for a moment, considering the battle in his mind. “I don’t know, about as long as me, probably.”



Sylvia laughed at his response. “Definitely not,” she denied. “I can’t say for certain, but I would estimate he began close to four months ago.”

Really?

Taken aback, Aaron shook his head.

“Like I said, your progress has been exceptional,” she insisted. “Most people have the potential to master Circle One, but for the average person, it often takes years of training to reach a decent level of proficiency—and most people aren’t that committed.”

“Interesting.” He folded his arms. “What about Circle Two, then?”

“Now you’re getting ahead of yourself,” Sylvia chided with a pointed finger.

“Well, it’s like you said, I’m moving quickly,” he said, sporting a confident grin.

“*Hm.*” She smirked. “Well, I’m sure you’ll come across it soon, but if you’re asking about in general, most never reach it.”

“Really?” he furrowed his brow.

“I’d say for every five people who master Circle One’s basics, only one of them will make it into Circle Two.”

“Huh,” Aaron simply nodded. “So what about Teigen? Do you think he’ll make it there?”

“Hard to say,” she replied. “We’ll just have to wait and see.”

Hmm.

Aaron still didn’t really know what Circle Two or the ones above it encompassed, but he was confident his magic would make it to that level—higher even. After all, if he really *was* ahead of the curve, then there was no reason for him to start falling behind now.

“Now, come with me,” Sylvia commanded, turning on her heel and heading back toward the manor. “We have something else to discuss.”

Aaron raised an eyebrow. “What’s going on?”

She didn’t look back, her voice steady and clipped. “We’ll talk on the way. I don’t have time to waste, so keep up.”

Aaron’s curiosity piqued, he followed her lead. “Alright.”



As Aaron and Sylvia entered the library, the scent of old parchment and wood lingered in the air, thick with silence. Sylvia slid behind the counter and retrieved a blackened metal box from beneath it. Aaron eyed the chest warily, his pulse quickening.

What was inside?

“This is for your journey,” Sylvia said, pushing the box toward him.



Aarons fingers grazing the cold metal surface. Despite its icy touch, he felt drawn to the box as if it were imbued with some sort of inexplicable magic.

Sylvia slowly lifted the lid, revealing inside a breathtaking sight. Bathed in a soft golden glow, a single dagger rested on rich red cloth.

The hilt was adorned with gold, its craftsmanship flawless, and the blade itself seemed almost ageless, its edges honed to perfection. Intricate designs marked it, and at the base of the blade, a glowing, blood-red crystal pulsed softly, its shape striking like a dragon's eye. Striations spread outward from its thin-slitted pupil, shifting in hue as though alive.

"Incredible..." Aaron murmured, his gaze fixed on the dagger. Just by looking at it, he could tell there was something special about it. His fingers brushed gently against the exquisite metal, warming at his touch as if it had a tangible aura.

It was like something straight out of a story, reminding him of legendary weapons in video games, only this felt different—real.

"This weapon has quite the history," Sylvia hummed, a wistful grin gracing her lips. "In fact, it's my history. I forged it during my time at the academy—call it my 'final project'—and I proceeded to use it in my missions that followed. Now, I'm passing it on to you."

"I'm honored," Aaron expressed. "You don't use it anymore?"

"Not often enough," Sylvia replied, shaking her head slightly. "I may find use for it again, but it spends far too much time gathering dust under my care. You'll give it more to see than I will."

"Thank you. It's... amazing," he slowly nodded, admiring the weapon still. "I just hope I'm able to make full use of it."

Sylvia responded with a smile. "I've seen enough of your combat abilities to know that you're capable of handling this."

Aaron shrugged, somewhat skeptical. "That was mostly hand-to-hand combat. My dagger skills are decent, but they're nothing too extraordinary." Curling his fingers around the handle, Aaron lifted the blade out of the box, its weight perfect in his hand. "It's exceptional."

"Thank you," she said, clearly pleased with the compliment.

He flourished it around gently in his hand, getting a feel for the weapon, and considering his former video-game analogy, a question came to mind. "Does it do anything special?"

"Hmm," Sylvia mused, giving a small smile. "You could say so. For now though, focus on getting a feel for it—the weight, balance, and handling are foundational. Master those first."

"Fair enough," he shrugged, setting the blade down. "I've got plenty else to learn before then."

"Quite," Sylvia affirmed. "Don't worry too much about the weapon; your curiosity will be satisfied in time."



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Heed the warning of the violet blossom that unfurls under the cloak of darkness. Its alluring beauty by day belies the deadly toxins it exudes in the light of the moon.

— *Cashil's World of Alchemy III*

Aaron spent an inordinate amount of time staring at the mirror in front of him, examining his face and muscles. It took him a while to adjust to his new form. Although his former self was of European descent, it wasn't entirely clear which ethnicity he resembled now. If he had to compare it to his old world, he likened his current appearance somewhere close to that of Asian descent instead.

Stretching his arms out to the sides, Aaron flexed them as he activated his Strengthening. Underneath his skin, his muscles pulsing with newfound strength. It was invigorating, as if every fiber of his being was coming alive.

Despite making progress with the basics of magic, Aaron still struggled with control. He could turn his abilities on and off, but he lacked the fine-tuned precision needed to adjust the output to his needs. But, determined to learn, he often found a surge of energy that kept him going all night. Even when his mana reserves were depleted, the thrill of it all kept fatigue at bay. It had been quite a while since he had felt this drive, but he welcomed the change of pace.

Today, however, magic would have to wait for a bit. He'd been told to meet Vendin somewhere else in town today: an inn. He had an idea of why, but he didn't bother pressing for answers at the time. After all, he'd find out soon enough.

Donning a light gray lightweight tunic with golden accents, paired with leather pants and a belt, Aaron readied himself to leave. This would be his first time leaving the Aevum Estate, and although there wasn't much he needed that he couldn't find here, he was actually excited to explore the city.

Checking himself, Aaron confirmed his belongings. Most importantly, he ensured that Sylvia's dagger sat on his side, stowed securely away in its sheath.

Although he didn't think any of the maids would dare steal from him, he didn't feel like taking any chances—not with a treasure like this.

For a moment, he took out the weapon, admiring the handiwork of its symmetrical, double-edged blade as it glinted in the morning light. But, eager to leave, he soon returned it to its place and got going.



Aaron had taken the carriage from the estate to the nearby edge of town, but instead of riding it all the way to Vendin's location, Aaron opted for a leisurely stroll. With roughly an hour to spare, he decided to enjoy the fresh air and the view of the city's streets. It would be a good opportunity to see what his family ruled over.

After all, what was the point of entering a new world if he didn't take the time to see what it had to offer?

Aaron weaved through the thoroughfare, his attention was drawn to the ubiquitous banners of the Aevum Hourglass which hung from nearly every building, serving as a constant reminder of their influence in the town.

Despite his best efforts to blend in on the bustling streets, Aaron couldn't avoid drawing attention to himself. Conversations often halted as he passed, people taking notice of him wherever he went. City guards nodded in his direction and instructed others to move aside, treating him as if he were someone of great importance.

But that's because he was.

It'd taken Aaron a while to come to terms with that fact, and it still felt strange to acknowledge, but that was reality now. In his old world, Aaron had carried out numerous missions involving assassination attempts, bribery, and blackmail, many targeting heads of state, business executives, or others in great positions of power. Yet now he was the one with the weight of influence.

At least he still did for another year.

Nevertheless, navigating the lively streets and contending with the crowds presented a unique challenge.

Finally, after another half-hour of walking, Aaron reached the chaotic tavern inn. Bells chimed as he stepped into the establishment, announcing his arrival. Inside, the place was teeming with activity. On one side, city soldiers gathered taking their lunch break, while on the other, a diverse group of traders mingled, each sporting their own unique uniforms and carrying their goods in parcels.

Permeating the air, the strong smell of cooking food and spices made Aaron's mouth water, and pairing it, the atmosphere was filled with the sounds of clinking glasses, murmured conversations, and the occasional burst of laughter.



“Oi, over here,” a voice called out to Aaron from across the crowded inn which he quickly identified as Vendin’s.

Spotting him at the other end, Aaron made his way through the sea of tables and chairs until he arrived at their circular table. Together with Vendin were two other people: a burly old man with a twirly mustache and a fair woman with a sword at her hip and long, flowing brown hair.

As he took his seat at the table, the man greeted him with a warm grin, revealing a set of teeth that seemed a little too well-maintained for Aaron’s taste—save for a gleaming golden tooth, they were immaculate. Despite his initial hesitation, Aaron accepted the handshake and returned it with a firm grip.

“Greetings, I’m Isaac,” the burly man introduced himself. “Isaac Pennington, and this is my daughter, Sarah.”

“Hello, good sir,” Sarah greeted Aaron with a coy smile.

“We’re traders that commonly deal with your family,” Isaac explained. “The Red Lizard Trading Company gives you a hearty greeting!” He waved vigorously, presenting Aaron with a bright red card.

As Aaron inspected the weighty card, he felt something was off. Other than the complex lizard design in the middle, it bore no markings or engravings, no information at all. But he couldn’t imagine handing out blank business cards, so he knew there had to be more to it.

Magic, maybe?

He channeled a flow of energy into the card, causing it to shimmer with a brilliant red. In an instant, his eyes were inundated with a cascade of vivid, three-dimensional projections, showcasing the myriad of offerings provided by the Red Lizard Trading Company.

Amazing.

The card came with its own presentation.

As the images continued to flow by, Aaron was impressed by the company’s offerings. From finely crafted weapons and armor to exotic spices and delicacies from a seemingly vast desert, the company’s reach seemed to span across the entire continent and all goods imaginable.

Isaac chuckled at Aaron’s expression, pleased with his reaction. “I see you’ve figured out how to activate the card. It’s a special feature we offer to our valued customers.”

“Not bad at all,” Aaron replied, still slightly dazed.

Sarah, the female next to Isaac, leaned forward, resting her chin on her hand. “If you ever find yourself in need of some assistance, don’t hesitate to give us a holler. We operate in every city in the Third Kingdom, and we’re always happy to help out our best clients.”

“I’ll be sure to keep that in mind,” he nodded.

Vendin cleared his throat, drawing the attention of the group. “Let’s get down to business,” he said.



“Of course,” Isaac said, exchanging a quick glance with Sarah. “We’re here to assist you in any way we can.”

Vendin delivered the news to Aaron with nonchalance, “They will escort you to the capital, Tenebris,” he said, watching Aaron’s reaction carefully. “But don’t get too excited just yet. You have a week to prepare before you depart.”

Aaron’s mind raced with anticipation, “A week?” he asked.

Vendin nodded. “Indeed. Make sure to use every moment wisely. That includes familiarizing yourself with the weapon Sylvia has given you.”

He gestured towards the sheathed dagger on the table, and instinctively, Aaron reached out to take it. But before he could fully remove it from its sheath, Vendin sprang into action, his reflexes lightning-fast as he deftly intercepted Aaron’s arm. Isaac jumped back in surprise, his eyes widening at Vendin’s sudden movement.

“Whoa, hold on a second,” Vendin lowered his voice and took on a concerned tone as he scolded Aaron. “What kind of recklessness is this? Even you should understand the seriousness of brandishing *that* weapon in public.”

Aaron quickly released his grip on the dagger, realizing his mistake.

Vendin shook his head in discomfort. “Be careful with that blade,” he said, his tone softening slightly. “It is one of the most bloodied weapons in this city.”

Aaron nodded, heeding his warning. “I don’t know that much about it,” he admitted. “Sylvia didn’t give me much information.”

“Then observe. I’ll only do this once,” Vendin sprung to his feet in a single, fluid motion. Moving swiftly behind Aaron, he grasped the weapon in its sheath and brought it over to the innkeeper’s countertop.

“We’d like to make use of your private room,” Vendin requested, “for a special meeting.”

The innkeeper looked at him with a shrewd look. “And who are you to make those demands?”

“Vendin, from the Redwind Order,” he replied.

“Will you compensate me for its use?”

Vendin shook his head.

“*Pssh*,” the innkeeper swatted his hands dismissively, uninterested in hearing whatever Vendin had to say. “Look, you Redwind folks have been a great help to us, but don’t act as if you own the town. That room is reserved for exclusive guests. If you can’t compensate me, then sit back down before I kick you out of the inn.”

In one swift pull, Vendin just barely unsheathed the weapon still seated atop the table, presenting the base of the gleaming, golden blade to the man, its luster shimmering in the dim light of the inn. “Would this change your mind in any way?”

With even that little, a flash of recognition stole the man’s expression, and he froze for a moment, his mouth caught gaping at the blade in horror.



Then, leaning onto the counter closer to Vendin, he pointed towards the door and spoke in a low, disquieted anger, almost desperate, “Just what do you think you’re doing with *that* weapon? Do you want to get us all killed?!”

Vendin remained calm, his eyes never leaving the innkeeper. “We will cause no trouble for you. So, will you comply?”

“*Argh*. You should have started with that,” the innkeeper glared at him for a long moment, his breaths coming in short, angry bursts. Finally, he relented with a gruff sigh, waving his hand dismissively. “Fine. After all, I’d rather you use our back room instead of chasing out my customers for whatever *meeting* you have. But keep that thing out of sight, you hear me?”

Vendin sheathed the blade and sat back down. “See?”

Aaron contemplated the interaction. “Is that a typical response?”

“There have been more extreme reactions,” Vendin shrugged. “That blade has eliminated a number of those in opposition to Aevum. I can’t say for sure how many—probably only Sylvia knows that—but if I had to guess, its count ranges in the hundreds.”

“Oh,” Aaron simply replied, struggling to find any other appropriate response.

“As I mentioned earlier,” Vendin cautioned, “the weapon you possess should not be underestimated. Although you could say this of all weapons, it was *created* to kill. Capable of shifting into various forms, it accommodates many situations.”

It became increasingly clear that Sylvia had entrusted him with a weapon of immense power, one that could easily be mishandled. The question was, why had she entrusted it to him that easily? Was it really just because she wasn’t using it, or was it to test him in some way?

“I understand,” Aaron replied, his hand resting carefully on the hilt of the weapon.

“So, shall we?” Vendin asked, signaling to the inn’s private room.

With a unanimous nod, the group swiftly made their way to the private room and settled into their new seats. Hashing out the details of the travel plan would be more appropriate behind closed doors.

Soon, a waiter arrived with their meal, a modest dish of meat seasoned with the basics. The server handed over the plates with caution, but Isaac wasted no time and dug in, showing little regard for proper etiquette. In contrast, Sarah ate with a graceful demeanor that still maintained a sense of courtesy.

“We have much to discuss,” Vendin stated, unfurling a map and presenting it to Aaron for inspection. “The Red Lizard Company plans to journey through the Erethon Forest as a shortcut. We’ll use our pre-established transport routes, but the journey won’t be brief.”

“I heard it takes a week of travel,” Aaron replied.

“Give or take, yes, but with appropriate planning, we can shorten the trip to five days, giving us time to stop inside Dventos. We’ll aim to reduce the dangers



of traveling in unclaimed territory, but bandits frequent main roads to ambush travelers, so we'll have to steer clear of those routes too."

Aaron nodded along to his explanation, analyzing the map intently. "Will you be joining us?" Aaron turned to Vendin.

"Unfortunately, it seems I have to deal with you for a little longer, yes," he replied.

Aaron chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll be sure to make it memorable."

"Don't get any wild ideas," Vendin grinned. "We'll be continuing your training en route to Tenebris. Additionally, when we make the stop in Dventos, I have a friend who could assist with your progress, if she happens to be around."

"Is that so?" Aaron asked, intrigued. "Girlfriend?"

"As if," he scoffed.

"Hey, you're a good looking guy," he teased. "No need to be shy about it."

"It seems your young age is showing," Vendin mocked. "She's not really the type for that anyway," he noted, moving on from the subject.

"Then I guess Tenebris is where we part ways?" Aaron surmised.

"Correct," he replied solemnly. "I'll have work to do in the South soon after. Your family requires aid in expanding their territory across the Vasir Mountains."

"You're partaking in the conquest of new lands on their behalf?"

"Our order has been allied with your family for decades," Vendin explained. "They provide us a portion of the lands we conquer with them, so it's mutually beneficial."

"Well, an adventure sounds fun," Aaron mused.

With all of Earth's territory having been mapped and explored long before his birth, it was an experience foreign to him, but maybe he'd get the chance to try it out here someday.

Aaron studied over the map more, his eyes scanning over the various landmarks and territories. He noted intricate patterns of lines and symbols indicating trade routes and various other markers indicating unknown or dangerous areas.

"Isaac, what kind of supplies do you recommend I bring?" Aaron asked, turning to the burly trader.

Isaac scratched his chin, taking a moment to ponder before responding. "Well, we'll have everything you need to get by, but in addition to your own belongings, I'd recommend adding in some sturdy boots in case we have to navigate the forest by foot."

"Anything else?" Aaron inquired further.

Isaac grinned. "You can always do with a bit of coin for trading. You never know when you might stumble upon something valuable or encounter a trader willing to strike a fair deal."

"A trader in the forest?" Aaron asked.

The man nodded. "Sure. There are many traders who are also adventurers, and those are the ones who tend to have the most interesting goods."



“Thanks for the advice.” Aaron nodded appreciatively.

As they settled on a modified route through the forest, Vendin sketched a dark line across the map to outline it. They marked several circles along the path as spots for rest, including small clearings within the woods and roadside taverns. Aaron could see that this new route would expedite their journey to the capital, but he remained wary of the potential dangers lurking along the path.

“Only ten guards?” Aaron inquired, his uncertainty evident regarding whether the number would suffice. Although he would’ve been confident in his old world, even alone, he was unfamiliar with the hazards this one may have had.

“They are the standard for transport wagons,” Vendin explained, “Five guards for wagon protection, one for scouting ahead, and the remainder to watch over the goods.”

“And I’ll be considered the ‘goods’ in that scenario, then?” Aaron replied dryly.

“That’s how we’re covering your departure,” Vendin confirmed.

“Don’t worry,” Sarah chimed in with a flirtatious grin. “Our guards are highly disciplined. And besides, you’ll have me to keep you company.”

Once Vendin had finished outlining the route on the map, he handed it to Aaron to look over. “Even with us there, you’ll need to stay vigilant,” he cautioned. “The Erethon Forest is home to numerous dangerous creatures, both magical and mundane. You’ll be in the wagon most of the time, but don’t stray far from watchful eyes during rest periods.”

Aaron nodded appreciatively, accepting the map and examining it closely, while Vendin shot Sarah a reproachful look. “And Sarah, your primary duty is to protect our client, not to entertain him,” he reminded.

Sarah rolled her eyes but assured him of her commitment.

“So...” Aaron tried to shift the conversation, “You’re here as a bodyguard?”

“Yep,” she replied with a nod. “But I’m also here to discuss the *cost* of our services. Vendin mentioned that your personal wealth is quite substantial, and I’d like to confirm that.”

“Oh, well about that...” Aaron smiled coyly, “I’m actually quite poor, you know.”

She chuckled. “Don’t try to undersell yourself, now.”

Aaron looked to Vendin for guidance, unsure of how to navigate the negotiation—Sarah’s fixated glare didn’t make the situation any easier.

Did he need to haggle, or was any price they gave him fine considering his family’s wealth?

A chuckle breaking the silence, Vendin put his hand on Aaron’s shoulder. “Aaron is willing to pay a reasonable and negotiable price for your services.”

With that said, Isaac wasted no time in presenting a contract for one hundred gold Vinar. Aaron examined it briefly, recognizing the Red Lizard Company insignia at the top. After a couple minutes of reading and being satisfied with



the terms, he signed the document with Vendin's quill pen and tossed it onto the table, sealing the deal.

"We will see you in a week," the burly man then announced, rising to his feet and gracefully pushing in his chair. Sarah bid them farewell with a playful wave before following her father out.

"That was surprisingly brief," Aaron remarked, glancing down at his half-finished plate. Vendin had already polished off his meal, and the traders' empty dishes had been promptly cleared away. As the door to the room swung open with Sarah and Isaac's departure, Aaron noticed the steady trickle of new customers that had come into the inn.

"Trost impresses me," Aaron commented, observing the bustling establishment.

"How so?" Vendin replied.

"I thought it would be more... basic," Aaron began, unsure how to articulate his thoughts. "But I was wrong. The atmosphere, the infrastructure—there's something about it that I like, even though I can't quite find the words to describe it."

"Your family deserves the credit for what you're seeing," Vendin said, dabbing his mouth with a handkerchief. "None of this would be here without them."

"Yes, I realize that," Aaron affirmed, mindful of the power that they wielded.

"Your family controls a significant portion of daily life within their borders," he elaborated. "Food, energy, even the economy. Their influence is far-reaching, and that's a part of why people choose to stay."

"Do people genuinely like them?"

"Well, as much as one can like any ruling power," Vendin pondered. "Compared to some of the other houses, they are one of the more favorable ones to live under. The Aevum offer fair housing, well-stocked potion shops, and fine clothing. Their public libraries are also impressive."

"I see," Aaron replied.

"It's my experience," Vendin offered a sincere smile. "You'll have the chance to make your own decision once you leave."

"I suppose so," he nodded. "Did you have any plans after lunch?"

"Training you, of course," Vendin replied with a smile.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Battles are not always won through brute force. Some are won through the subtle machinations of the mind. And what game serves as a better arena for such conflicts than the King's Game?

— *Modern Strategy of Combat*

Time seemed to pass in a blur as Aaron underwent grueling training sessions from dawn until dusk. He absorbed knowledge not just of combat but of the world at large.

Over the past week, somehow, Sarah had made herself at home in his abode, and he found himself unable to refuse her.

"Come and take a break with me," she beckoned, reclining on a luxurious hammock in the sun. "It's nice to spend some time in the sun."

Aaron had no idea they even had hammocks until she requested one from the maids who seemed all too eager to please her. He was surprised at how quickly she had integrated herself with the household staff, wondering if that was just her natural charm or if there was something else at play.

"Have you come just to eat my food, or have you come to help me train?" Aaron asked, skeptical of Sarah's motives. Despite Vendin's high praise of her dueling skills and formidable wind magic, Aaron had yet to see any evidence of it in action.

"You seem to be doing fine on your own," she said with a smug smile, taking a sip of his liquor. "This food is *fantastic*, by the way. No wonder the Aevum never eat anywhere else. Let me bring some home afterward—that's OK, right?"

Aaron gave a light tap to his temple. "And I'm reminded why I don't like talking to people."

Sarah rose to her feet and straightened her posture. "You told me it's only been, what, three weeks since you started learning magic? At the rate you're improving, it's not like you need me to teach you discipline."

"There's more to learning magic than just discipline," Aaron replied. She laughed. "You say that, but most people never get past that part." He couldn't argue with that.

"Well, surely you have something more you can teach me," Aaron implored. "How about your sword techniques?"

"And risk revealing my secrets to someone like you?" she let out an exaggerated gasp, her voice filled with sarcasm. "Oh, the horror! Imagine if you uncovered the techniques of my wind-wielding magic."

"Alright, I get it," Aaron sighed, brushing aside her concerns. It was worth a try, but he supposed it was natural for her to safeguard her techniques.

"Besides," Sarah interjected, "your family's known for their magic. I'm sure when you develop your Spellpoint, you'll outshine me in no time."

"I've come across that term often in my readings, but no one has actually given me a clear definition of what it means," Aaron remarked.

"A Spellpoint is like the center of your magic," Sarah explained. "It's the part of you that holds the capacity to manipulate mana—and usually, it's what you end up using to actualize it."

"So... it's a part of my body like my Mana Core and Circuits then."

"Not quite," she corrected gently. "It's not physical, like an organ. It's more like your personality—something tied to your soul."

"Hmm..." Aaron contemplated the information. "And it's integral to magic?"

"You could say that—at least with how we use it. Magic's pretty flexible, but sorcerers have shaped it into a system," she said with a shrug, clearly not fully confident in the deeper details herself. "My passion for dueling had a big influence on how my Spellpoint manifested—same with my tutor's guidance. And my father's? His came from his love of business, believe it or not."

"How do you figure out what it is?"

"You'll know when you bind it," Sarah explained. "But that's not something you're quite ready for yet. Once you've developed a mastery of magic within your body, then you can begin to project it outwards."

"Your magic could be anything though?"

"In theory," she nodded. "It all depends on the individual. I've seen some truly remarkable abilities over the years—some good, some... not so good."

"Yeah?" Aaron leaned in to listen.

"Have you heard of the Decade War?" Sarah asked.

Aaron pondered the question, searching his memory before responding, "I believe so, but I haven't researched it at all."

"Well, as the name suggests, it lasted for a decade." Sarah's tone turned solemn as she continued, "You'd think the Second Kingdom would've been prepared for war—but they weren't ready for anything like this. It was a new era—an era of magic—and the old kingdoms were slow to adapt."

"What happened?"



“It was one man against the empire, but that one man created an army. Fueled by his magic, the enemy ranks only grew as the war dragged on. He captured people—citizens and soldiers alike—and used their vitality to grant his own a life-tether. And when our troops fell...” She hesitated. “He turned them against us.”

Life-tether?

Aaron remained silent, the atmosphere calling for his silence.

“Their soldiers wouldn’t stay dead,” Sarah said quietly. “When they were slain, a death mark would appear on their bodies, and they’d rise again—granted another chance to fight. They traded someone else’s soul for their own, only to fall again when we finally overpowered them. It was an endless cycle. A nightmare we couldn’t wake up from.”

“Wait, so the soul is a tangible entity?” Aaron interjected, confused.

“Undoubtedly,” Sarah said with certainty. “Take Spellpoints, for example. Your Spellpoint is part of your soul, and when you bind it, you’re essentially giving it a physical form outside your body.”

Aaron tried to wrap his head around the idea, but it was difficult to conceptualize. Regardless, he insisted she continue with her explanation.

“Simply put, the enemy militia was an army of the cursed, the undead and the undying,” she stated, her gaze unfocusing. “As curses bind to the soul, it was inescapable for most. They became endless puppets forced to follow that man’s twisted ambition,” Sarah spoke with a certain revile, her eyes narrow.

“Then how did it end?” Aaron asked.

“Well, no magic is indomitable,” she gave pause to her speech as if recalling a memory. “Towards the end, someone infiltrated their ranks so they could get close enough to the maniac behind it all. They *let* themselves be controlled, only to break free when they needed to.”

Seriously?

He supposed the concept wasn’t too different from regular infiltration, but the aspect of ‘magical control by curse’ he felt made it *just a little* more complicated.

“Who was it?” he pressed.

Sarah smirked, giving a haughty chuckle. “The books don’t mention it, but I figured you would’ve known at least this part,” she gave him a discerning look. “It was your grandfather.”

“Really?” Aaron replied, surprised.

“Mhm,” she closed her eyes and nodded. “I saw it for myself—when the undead army finally dropped, well... dead, and he came out with the leader’s head. And after the war, you’d better believe that the Second Kingdom picked up the pace on magic. Basic Circle One training became part of their mandatory combat instruction for citizens. Not everybody is fit for it, but anything is better than nothing.”



“Wait a minute—” Aaron interjected, a thought coming to mind as his mind pieced together the information. “*You* saw that happen? But wasn’t that conflict several decades ago?”

“You are correct about that,” Sarah affirmed.

There was a brief lull in the conversation as Aaron’s mind raced to connect the dots. “Then wouldn’t that mean...?”

If she had lived during the Decade War, that would imply that she’d have to be at least, what, in her seventies?

But she looked nowhere near that old.

“Surprised?” she asked with a smile.

Aaron studied her with uncertain intrigue, his gaze drifting over her features as he tried to reconcile her words with reality. Her skin was flawless, not a wrinkle in sight, and her brown hair still held a vibrant sheen. If he had to guess, he’d say she was in her mid-twenties at most.

“I’m...” Aaron began, words failing to come to him. “Is it magic?”

“Hmm,” Sarah mused, gently unsheathing her sword, staring into its shiny metal like a mirror at her own face. “Something like that,” she finally answered, but her tone seemed confusing to him, simultaneously amused yet melancholic.

Then, with lightning-quick reflexes, Sarah brandished her rapier, aiming it directly at him.

Aaron jumped back, clenching his dagger.

Did she intend to fight him?

“You ready?” She asked.

Without hesitation, Aaron activated Insight and Foresight. As her aura flared to life in front of him, the answer to his unspoken thought became clear.

Anticipation raced through his body as Sarah’s eyes darkened and her concentration turned razor-sharp. Consuming fifty percent of his maximum mana, Aaron activated Tempering and Strengthening in equal proportions. It seemed she hadn’t just been loitering around him while he trained for nothing.

“About time you moved those old bones of yours,” Aaron quipped, egging her on.

“You wanted some action, didn’t you?” Sarah declared, ignoring his remark, “I think it’s time I deliver exactly what you asked for.”

Lunging at Aaron with lightning speed, she aimed her rapier at his abdomen. The impact sent him reeling, narrowly avoiding a fatal blow. His Tempering saved him; otherwise, the rapier would have pierced his flesh.

She wasn’t trying to kill him, was she?

“Nice to see you’re not all talk,” Aaron grinned, eager for a challenge.

“Well, if that’s all you’ve got, this’ll be over soon,” she confidently stated. “Make this worth my time.”

Nodding, Aaron took a deep breath and focused on the battle ahead. As Sarah charged at him once more, he sidestepped her attack, expertly avoiding her



rapier. He countered with a quick strike at her sword arm, but Sarah effortlessly parried his blow, showcasing her swordsmanship.

They clashed repeatedly, each striving for the upper hand, but the first several bouts went without any successful strikes.

He needed to push himself further.

Cranking up his Strengthening, he started to overload his body to go faster—to strike harder. A searing ache began to burn in his muscles, but amidst the agony, a soothing sensation also had soon enveloped him, dulling the pain. Though his awareness wavered, he refused to let it break his concentration, maintaining strict focus on Sarah’s movements.

Aaron switched to the offensive, launching himself at Sarah with lightning speed to unleash a rapid barrage of impactful jabs. In response, Sarah adopted a poised, defensive stance that was nearly impenetrable.

But despite her expert evasion and parrying, one blow finally landed, shattering her internal Tempering aura and sending her flying backward.

“Not bad,” she smirked. Rising to her feet, she grasped the handle of her rapier, casting a spell with a determination blazing in her eyes. “You know, there is a saying about magic,” she proclaimed, igniting her weapon. “It always mirrors the soul.”

A magnificent green light emanated from beneath Sarah’s feet, enveloping the surrounding area in a massive verdant circle. Aaron realized that he could not escape the perimeter, watching as the circle burned a distinct emblem onto the ground below, almost as if Sarah was claiming her territory.

“This ability is called Grand Challenge,” Sarah declared, her voice resonating. “As part of the conditions I’ve set for it, I have to explain to you how it works, so listen up.”

Looking for an opening while she spoke, Aaron poised himself to strike. He had hoped this moment would expose a vulnerability that he could exploit, but surprisingly he could find none. Sarah maintained just as much control as she did before.

“Anyone who steps out of this circle will endure damage equal to what they’ve taken within it. The one who initiates this circle will also receive boosted abilities,” she continued. “Upon leaving the circle, they’ll bear a curse preventing them from using magical techniques or enhancements for twenty minutes. The curse takes effect post-Grand Challenge, and the duel’s victor won’t face any penalties.”

Aaron braced himself facing Sarah and her impressive magic. This new power both terrified and intrigued him. Until now, he’d thought magic was all about straightforward enhancements or hurling fireballs at foes.

But Sarah’s magic was something else entirely—precise, inescapable. It guaranteed an outcome, and the consequences could be lethal as damage stacked up. Even surrender wouldn’t save the loser; it left them vulnerable, stripped of their magic, completely at the victor’s mercy.



In essence, it was a death sentence. In a real battle, one would die. The other would emerge triumphant.

"I concede," Aaron declared, taking a step back.

As the expansive circle shifted to a deep crimson and vanished with a sharp sizzle, Aaron felt his magical aura cut off, like a switch had been flipped. A curse mark formed on his right palm, leaving a faint sting as it settled into place. He tested his magic—nothing responded. Each ability was sealed off, completely inaccessible for the time being.

"Didn't you want a challenge?" Sarah asked, somewhat confused by his actions.

"I've already learned a lot from that alone," Aaron admitted. "But I knew I wasn't walking out of that one the victor, no matter what I did."

She chuckled. "It's won me plenty of battles—but it's not without its drawbacks." With that, Sarah sheathed her rapier and stepped back.

Aaron shook his head in quiet defeat. It had been a while since he'd lost so completely, but really—what could he have done? With his limited knowledge and abilities, there was no way he could have contested *that*.

"Now that you've won, though," Aaron walked to the nearby bench and sat down. "Could you cancel this curse early?" Aaron asked half jokingly.

"Afraid not," she replied with a shake of her head. "I have to follow its rules."

"Bound to the soul, right?" he knowingly asked.

"Well, aren't you a quick study?" she smirked.

"My grandfather was able to do it though," he reasoned. "How'd he manage that?"

"Simple," she said. "His soul was stronger."

Hmm.

Aaron studied the mark on his hand, prodding it with a finger as if he could somehow rub it away. The soul, it seemed, was the key to many of this world's deeper mysteries. In his old world, he'd never given much thought to whether it truly existed—certainly not as something tangible. But here, it was undeniable.

"Can you modify your ability?" Aaron asked, curious about the limitations.

"Yes, but it would take me days of preparation. I cannot modify it while it is active."

"I see... so how do I create my own ability?"

"Finally interested in what I have to say?" Sarah grinned. "Best advice I can give? Look inward. Like I said, magic reflects the soul. But before you get to that point, you still need to nail down the basics."

Great, that helped.

"In that case, I'll go back to being uninterested in what you have to say." Aaron quipped.



As daylight faded, Aaron retreated to his room, worn out from the day's exertions. But even as he settled in for the night, a quiet restlessness lingered—there was still much to do, and little time to waste. That was when he noticed the letter lying on his bed, addressed in his father's familiar handwriting.

Curiosity stirred as he tore open the envelope, eager to see what it held.

The letter wished him a safe farewell on the journey ahead. Alongside it sat a black-and-gold pouch, reinforced with leather and filled with a thousand gold Vinar. It was more than enough to cover his expenses for a long while, and Aaron couldn't help but appreciate the gesture from his father. He bit down on one of the coins to check its authenticity, then flipped it into the air, catching it easily between his hands.

He flipped it around, playing into an old habit of his that started as a trick he picked up from his old mentor. Whenever he felt lost or struggled with indecision, he used the coin to guide him. It was strange—he didn't trust his life in the hands of others, but for some reason, a part of him felt okay with leaving it in the hands of fate.

Although he was enthusiastic about embarking on his journey tomorrow, this wouldn't be like one of his regular missions.

Studying at an academy marked an entirely novel experience for him, something he'd never encountered even in his previous life. Formal education had evaded in his earlier years where he lived, and after being inducted into the business, he'd always been treated like an adult, undergoing strict and private training without mingling with peers of his age.

But this was a fresh start and, perhaps, an intriguing opportunity for him.

Aaron's thoughts swirled, and he realized he needed a change of scenery to clear his head. A flicker of excitement stirred at the thought of starting at the academy. Normally, he'd dread certain missions, but this one felt different—like a chance to make up for lost time. He'd only been twenty-two when he died, not far from his current age now.

Wandering the mansion's silent halls, Aaron found himself entranced by the moonlight streaming through the windows. It painted intricate patterns across the floors and walls, bathing everything in a soft, silvery glow. Eventually, he reached the lush garden at the rear of the estate, drawn there in search of a quiet place to think. It was also a habit he'd picked up over time—pacing during missions, shifting restlessly whenever his mind was heavy.

As he arrived, however, he spotted a figure already on the spacious garden patio.

Who would be outside this late at night?

He approached, and there she stood, her silver hair gleaming like a crown of stars in the moonlight.



“Hello, hello,” Sylvia mumbled, indicating for Aaron to draw near with her delicate fingers. In one hand, she clutched a weighty, dark and gold quill pen, while in the other, she grasped a large bottle of wine that was nearly empty.

Despite her clear inebriation, Sylvia had a sense of ease and relaxation, attired in a flowing white silk dress with a light cloth that revealed a hint of her figure beneath.

“How did you recognize me?” Aaron asked.

Sylvia chuckled softly. “Your strides may be small, but they still carry weight. Your approach was easily detectable from a distance.” She took a sip from her bottle, her eyes glinting with the night’s reflections. “I never would have imagined you to be the type to appreciate the gardens by moonlight.”

“I’ve found this to be a nice place to collect my thoughts,” Aaron admitted.

“It’s particularly magical under the light of the full moon, isn’t it?” Sylvia added, basking in its serenity. “And some wine makes it perfect. Care for a drink?”

“I probably shouldn’t,” he declined. “I depart tomorrow.”

“Ah... my apologies. That’s right,” she said with a soft nod. “Do you, by any chance, feel apprehensive about it?”

“Not particularly,” Aaron admitted, looking up at the starry sky for a moment. But he soon shifted his attention back to Sylvia, wishing to avoid impertinence. “What about you?” he asked. “You seem to be drinking quite a bit. Are you doing alright yourself?”

“Merely the lengthy list of my duties drowning me,” she sardonically remarked, speaking with a dry weariness that feigned composure. “I’m fine,” she said with a faint smile, closing the silence that followed her previous statement. “Nothing I’m not used to.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring,” he said, taking a seat on the nearby bench.

“That’s because it’s not,” Sylvia laughed and moved to fill the open space next to him, setting the bottle down on the cobbled ground next to the bench without making a noise. “Specifically, territorial governance matters. House Valorin has presented me with a complex puzzle to solve.”

“I’ve heard about them,” Aaron remarked, his mind flickering back to his studies.

“They are... interesting,” Sylvia scoffed, “Their methods may seem nonsensical, but their results speak for themselves.”

“I might be able to help,” Aaron offered.

Sylvia gave him a scrutinizing look but eventually softened. “No need. Their mastery of magic surpasses your abilities. Perhaps at another time.”

“Perhaps,” he repeated, allowing a moment for the night’s calm to speak for itself.

Of course, she was right. Maybe if this had been his old world, he’d be capable, but here... what could he possibly do at his level?

He could at least offer solace.



"You know," he began. "Father could give you a break every now and then."

She shook her head. "He hasn't forced anything on me," she clarified. "My situation is a product of my own contrivance."

Ah, a workaholic.

And the empty wine bottle hinted at another possible fixation. He understood the impulse. He, too, had a tendency to take on more than he should—though in his case, it stemmed from perfectionism and an unwavering belief in his own abilities.

"Besides," she continued. "I'll be taking a vacation of sorts soon, I guess you could call it."

"That's good to hear."

"Though, it'll come with its own bounty of troubles," she followed up, admitting to the underlying truth behind her claim.

"Doesn't sound like much of a vacation, then," Aaron replied.

"I'm leading an expedition to the Vasir Mountains," Sylvia explained. "Our goal is to establish a foothold, though it will be a lengthy endeavor. If everything goes according to plan, maybe you'd like to join us there once you've completed your education."

"Maybe," he pondered, open to the thought but thoroughly unequipped to make a decision at the moment. "I'd have to think about it some more."

"No hurry," she assured him. "You've got plenty of time and a world of possibilities to explore."

"Well, it sounds exciting nonetheless," he earnestly expressed, calling upon his limited knowledge on the region. "If I remember correctly, we already have a town of sorts down there."

"Indeed, we do. Geraldia," she confirmed. "It's small, however, and lives largely on the periphery of the region."

"And no one else has claimed land there?"

"Well, now you can see part of my quandary," Sylvia replied. "Though the southern mountains remain unexplored, it is becoming increasingly common knowledge that it hosts strong mana crystals. Although we possess the foremost position and means to capitalize on it, many others complicate the situation."

"House Valorin, I presume."

"They're one of the troublesome ones, yes," she confirmed. "Valorin has many agents within our borders, making the prospect of direct confrontation unwise. Negotiations with them could drag on for long, leaving us vulnerable to attack if they do not conclude before the expedition begins. Assassination remains a viable option, though it's likely they are considering the same tactic against us."

"We could wait to explore the mountains," Aaron suggested.

"Unfortunately, opportunity doesn't wait, Aaron," Sylvia replied matter-of-factly. "If you hesitate too long, your chance either fades... or someone else takes it. As an assassin, I'm sure you understand that better than most."



"In my experience, it's wiser to let go of the kill than to risk dying in the attempt," he disagreed. "Miss your opportunity, and you can find another one—perhaps at a different time or place or with more information. But if you blow your chance, you might not get another."

"I suppose that's where the difference lies, isn't it?" she said, rising to her feet and taking a few slow steps, feeling the grass beneath her toes. "You can't lead by waiting for others to decide your next move. Sure, taking action might lead to your downfall—but total inaction will kill you just the same. In the end, it's all about how you play the game."

"Hmm," Aaron pondered, watching her hair dance around like moondust. "I can see the distinction," he conceded.

"I assure you that we did not get where we are today by letting others dictate the flow of history," Sylvia spoke with a trace of pride coloring her words. "Our ancestors did not stand by and hope for the empire to allow magic before they started to explore its capabilities. They didn't wait around for the Third Kingdom to be born before they explored its lands. They embraced the unknown to build an empire of their own, and we will continue that legacy."

Sylvia's words made sense, and they were something Aaron was beginning to understand better. As an assassin, a part of him always thought he could use his power to influence the direction the world moved towards. In a way, that was true, but as long as he was waiting for others to make the decisions, the only power he held was over life and death.

Aaron stood up as a question plagued his mind. "And what happens if you make the wrong decision? What if everything changes because of one mistake?"

"*Hmph*," Sylvia smirked. "Isn't that the point, though? Not to shy away from the actions that will change your life?"

Her gaze remained cast up on the moon that dominated the starry sky, bathing in its regal shower of light.

Aaron considered her question. On one hand, a part of him understood what she meant—even a bad choice led to something new, the needle of progress moving regardless of direction. But on the other hand, was it so flawed to want to keep what you had?

Sylvia answered for him, "If your decision *is* wrong though. Then you hope the casualties are minimal."

"Well, no sweat then," Aaron derisively returned.

"It's why people will die for information," she firmly replied. "Once the wrong decision has been made, it's already too late. If you don't prepare for every situation to protect your power, you'll lose it."

"But if you're killing yourself in the process, is the trade even worth it?" Aaron posed the question.

Sylvia let out a faint laugh, then turned to face him. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder, her eyes meeting his with quiet warmth.



“You don’t have to worry about me, Aaron.”

He held her gaze. “Don’t you think that kind of burden is too much for one person?” he asked. “It shouldn’t be shouldered alone.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure our success,” she said firmly, not a flicker of doubt behind her steady, ice-cold gaze. “For us, family legacy means more than you realize. If that means giving up myself... then so be it.”

And with that, she silently strode past Aaron back into the manor, leaving him in company with only the stars and those final words, lingering in the air long after she vanished into the darkness. Aaron stood alone, his thoughts swirling as he contemplated their conversation. He gazed up at the glittering night sky once more, and he felt a twinge of regret.

Maybe he should have taken Sylvia’s offer of a drink—should have savored the taste of the liquor on his tongue.

But it was too late now, and he was left with nothing but an empty bottle.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

With the founding of the first kingdom came an era of peace. The second, an era of war. The third kingdom, rising from the ashes of its predecessors, what fate does it hold?

— Tenik Fiairi, The Exiled King

As Aaron prepared for Isaac's arrival, he moved with efficiency, packing his belongings into a spacious suitcase.

But, admittedly, he didn't have much.

Most of what he brought were a few changes of clothes, but over his brief time in this world thus far, he hadn't had the opportunity to get very attached to anything. Sylvia and Sarah had advised and procured a few small boxes of basic potions and medicinal herbs to bring along, but other than that and the bare essentials, his luggage was fairly light.

"Marquess moves forward," Sylvia announced, her fingers deftly shifting across the square board of the game they were playing as he packed. Aaron swiftly redirected his focus, his gaze locked onto the board.

He studied it intently, his eyes following the positions of his pieces. Realizing that he'd fallen into a mating net, he frowned. "Ah," he clicked his tongue in annoyance. "You got me."

"I didn't know you were good at the King's Game," Sylvia remarked. "If I had, I wouldn't have underestimated you early on."

"It was a close game," Aaron nodded. "We had this game in my old world too under a different name. There's a lot of developing theory, but AI has made the game a bit stale, so I didn't spend much time on it—I had other things to do anyway."

"AI?" Sylvia looked up, puzzled. "I'm unfamiliar with that term."

"Artificial Intelligence," Aaron explained. "Don't think about it too much. It's just an engine that simulates future positions and evaluates the best moves."

"Ah," Sylvia replied. "That's quite interesting."

Aaron shook his head with a smile. "Anyways, you're really good, but I'll beat you next time."

Sylvia raised an eyebrow, her expression one of amused skepticism. "Is that so? I'd love to see you try."

"Don't get too ahead of yourself," Aaron responded confidently. "I'll get some practice in, and when I beat you, I'll make sure you won't forget it."

Sylvia's lips curled into a sly grin. "Then until then, I eagerly await the challenge."

She deftly rearranged the pieces on the board back into its container. But despite her focus, Aaron couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched by someone. He honed his senses with magic, attuned to disturbances in his surroundings, and as if on cue, a figure materialized out of the shadows. Aaron recognized the young girl immediately.

"Why hello there, Nina," Sylvia greeted her warmly, giving her a pat on the back. "What brings you here?"

Nina's eyes flickered over the chessboard. "I came to deliver a gift," she said, presenting Aaron with a delicate ring studded with a translucent pearl that shone with a golden hue.

"For me?" Aaron asked, astonished.

"Mhm!" she nodded eagerly, her silver hair bobbing up and down.

Aaron accepted the gift, carefully examining the fine craftsmanship.

"This is beautiful," he remarked.

"It's for your journey," Nina explained. "Mother insisted that you have it."

"Speaking of which," Sylvia retrieved a small black envelope and presented it to Aaron in both hands.

"Another gift?" he asked, staring at its golden linings as they glinted in the gentle light of the library.

She nodded, and he reached out to take it from her. The envelope felt smooth to the touch, almost as if it defied its own existence in its current form. With meticulous care, he unfurled it to unveil a sturdy and exquisite metal plate adorned with the hourglass insignia of the Aevum.

"*This* is your ticket," Sylvia said.

"To the academy?"

"To everywhere," Sylvia replied with certainty. "It wasn't easy convincing Father."

Aaron raised an eyebrow, confused.

"This plate is a marker of our family," she explained. "It's the authentication of our family crest. With it, you can open certain doors—potentially even the wrong ones. It all depends on how you wield it."

Aaron fell into a momentary silence, lost in his thoughts as he understood the weight of trust that was being placed onto him. He'd seldom received gifts in



his former life, especially not ones that held such power to them. Carefully, Aaron slipped the plate back into the envelope and secured it in his pocket. He'd have to find a better way to secure it later, but for now, that would do.

"Thank you," he said, smiling at both Nina and Sylvia. "Both of you."

And with Nina's appearance, it was evident that Aaron's time to leave had come. Sylvia was the first to stand up and gestured for Aaron to follow. Though reluctant, he knew they had no choice—it wasn't good to keep the others waiting. At the exit, Aaron hesitated, feeling a little remorseful about leaving without a proper farewell.

But, before he could speak, Sylvia enveloped him in a swift, comforting hug. "Don't worry," she replied, her voice soothingly soft. "We'll meet again soon. Stay safe out there."

Aaron nodded, a warm sense of gratitude washing over him from Sylvia's support. There were numerous things he still wished to discuss with her, countless questions he wanted to ask, but it seemed like they'd have to wait. "We'll have a lot to catch up on when I get back."

Sylvia nodded. "That we shall."

Pausing for a moment, Aaron added. "... I'm going to miss you."

"Don't miss me too much," she teased. "I might start doing the same."

Aaron followed Nina toward the front of the mansion. As he walked, he felt the ring on his middle finger begin to radiate a soft glow before dimming and fading once again. He glanced over at Nina who skipped along with enthusiasm.

"Mother also said to never lose it."

"Is this hers?" Aaron looked at the ring on his finger, a warmth emanating from its faint frame. As he turned it around to study it, he noticed it was patterned with unique, interesting designs etched across its thin band. He couldn't tell if they belonged to some foreign writing or otherwise, but having the ring made him more at ease.

It was a strange feeling. Aaron had received many gifts from his family since his short time in this world. It wasn't something he was used to or expected, especially considering the unique circumstances, but he couldn't help but feel grateful.

"I'll be sure to take good care of it," he let out a warm smile.

"Will you miss me, Nina?" Aaron asked with a grin.

She stuck out her tongue in response. "No way!"

Aaron smiled, "I thought not," he mused, ruffling her hair affectionately as they walked. "I'll be learning a lot of magic though. What if I taught you some of it? Would you change your mind then?"

"Hmm..." Nina thought. "Maybe!"

Stepping outside, Aaron encountered a flurry of activity as butlers and maids in various uniforms loaded cargo onto a waiting transport. Eric was among them,



chatting animatedly with Isaac about their wares and taking notes on a clipboard with a quill pen.

"Aaron! Over here!" called a familiar voice, and Aaron turned to see Sarah cheerfully walking over to him. From a distance, she looked quite young, and he wondered how many people had been fooled by her beauty only to be shocked by their age difference later on. Perhaps she simply didn't tell anyone about it at all.

Despite his misgivings, Aaron felt a bit fond of Sarah. She may have been eccentric, but she was also kind and wise in her own way—he certainly hoped she'd be at least a *little* wise given her age.

Nearby, he also spotted Vendin helping the merchants pack cargo into one of the other wagons. He figured he wouldn't interrupt them.

"It seems you're in a chipper mood," Sarah remarked, giving him a pat on the back.

"You think so?"

"Well, you usually have a scowl on your face when you see me," Sarah shrugged. "But I *am* known to flutter the hearts of men, so perhaps it's a good sign?"

"Don't get too ahead of yourself," Aaron replied. "I just received a gift."

"Oh?" Sarah leaned in, her curiosity piqued. "What kind of gift are we talking about here? Physical? Emotional? Or perhaps... sexual?"

"What do you think goes on in our household?" Aaron asked.

"I'm not entirely certain. Actually, nobody really is. That's why I wanted to ask," Sarah replied, her voice hushed and conspiratorial. "I have a keen interest in juicy rumors and intriguing gossip. If you want to share some stories during our journey, I'll be happy to compensate you."

Aaron raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Am I your escort or your customer?" he asked, shaking his head. "The gift I received was just a farewell token from my family. Besides, I don't think I want any type of compensation from you."

"I don't mean it like that," she laughed. "Sometimes having good company is enough compensation, you know?"

"I'm just glad we're talking about that type of company."

"Of course not, I would never! Never mingle business and pleasure, you know," Sarah reached out to pat his arm. "Speaking of family, I remember when I had to part ways with my own children," she said, her voice wistful.

"What happened to them?" Aaron asked, curious.

"Nothing interesting," Sarah replied with a shrug. "They work for the company now."

"Oh," Aaron said, "You made it sound like you don't see them very often."

"Well, they're stationed on the other side of the continent, so it's not easy," she remarked. "But I do enjoy teasing their lovers about their wild and adventurous past."

Aaron handed his suitcase to Sarah who effortlessly tossed it into the carriage wagon.



He winced with concern, fearing it might break or spill open. But before he could object, Sarah gestured for him to take a seat in the surprisingly well-appointed caravan, despite its apparent lack of maintenance.

After several minutes of waiting, Aaron felt the wagon lurch forward before coming to a stop once again. Then, after a soft whinny, it began to move forward at a steady pace. He was finally at the beginning of his journey to Tenebris.



The night was pitch black, with only faint teal lamp lights hanging from the sides of the wagon to illuminate their path. Aaron sat in the carriage, his focus fixed on Sarah as he sought answers about the relationship between his family and her organization.

Aaron had been consumed by his training in the past few days, but since now that they had some downtime, he was curious to learn more about her. Sarah sat silently at the reins, her eyes piercing the darkness as she navigated their path forward. Just as Aaron was about to speak up again, she silenced him with a sharp hush, her gaze still fixed ahead on the road.

"It's not wise to speak openly at this hour," Sarah replied, casting a cautious glance back at Aaron. "Secret, remember?"

"Ah, right," Aaron acknowledged, understanding the importance of his discretion. "I suppose this isn't the best time for conversation, then."

Sarah rummaged through her satchel, producing a thick book. She handed it back to him, keeping her eyes on the road ahead. It was fairly weathered, bound in sturdy leather, and a sparkling gem in the center of the cover kept the pages tightly held together by magic.

Hm?

She didn't provide him an explanation, but he wasn't averse to having something to read. As he opened the book, however, he was surprised to find that it was completely blank.

"What is this?" he asked, his brow furrowing with confusion.

"That book contains detailed reports of all the trading we've conducted with the Aevum family over the past year," Sarah clarified. "Of course, we continue to update it over time, but this is our most recent version."

Aaron's frown deepened further as he examined the seemingly empty log. She didn't understand why she'd wanted him to read that, but whatever her reasons, clearly there was some trick to uncovering the book's contents.

Hmm... Probably similar to the card.

Aaron attempted to infuse mana into the book, as he had with the card he received, but it yielded no results. He then tried various other tactics: turning it upside down, flipping it backward, and even running his fingers over the pages in



search of invisible ink. But there was no sign of invisible writing or any discernible content still. He also tried tapping the mana crystal in the book's center, but it remained unresponsive.

And then, a memory from his training with Vendin flickered to life in his mind.

Insight?

Aaron focused his mind and activated the technique, hoping to search for anything within, through the lens of mana. He reasoned it could've possibly used a specialized ink made from mana or something like that.

As he focused, he finally saw that the book was pulsating with energy. Vendin had taught him that magical artifacts and special items often held more mana than apparent, either due to intentional use of it or the creator's lingering attachment. It seemed that was the case here.

Eventually, words appeared on the page in black ink, confirming Aaron's success.

While Aaron looked into the book's contents, he also sensed a subtle, shimmering presence in the air around him. It was as if the entire environment was veiled in a delicate layer of mana, and with his Insight aiding him, he soon realized that was indeed the case. A protective barrier had been intricately woven into the caravan's very fabric, likely to occlude its interior contents.

The guise of an old and worn-out carriage was nothing more than a ruse to deceive any curious onlookers.

"Do you now comprehend the intricacies of our craft?" Sarah asked.

"I didn't know you could do this," Aaron replied, his eyes wide in amazement. "It's quite interesting, to say the least."

"Since we have some time, I'll tell you a little story. But try to keep your voice low," she instructed. "Have you ever heard of the Desert Ruby Salamander?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"The Desert Ruby Salamander," Sarah started, sticking a finger up as she spoke to draw Aaron's attention, "inhabits the Mirage Desert, a place nearly inhospitable to most creatures except those that have evolved to its harsh conditions. It has adapted to blend in with the red hues of its rockier landscapes, offering it perfect camouflage against predators. By some miracle, it sustains itself solely on water and sunlight, requiring no food, and though harmless, it resembles another lizard: the Desert Rose Salamander."

Sarah paused, her words hanging in the air, holding Aaron's attention.

"The Desert *Rose* Salamander," she held up two fingers now, "is extremely poisonous, emitting toxins from every gland that can prove fatal on contact. Some even use its poison to create deadly potions," she noted. "Unlike the Ruby Salamander, the Desert Rose requires both energy and nutrients to survive and can't subsist on sunlight alone. When creatures rest at night after the daytime heat



subsides, the Desert Ruby has a natural ability to sense water, and the Desert Rose follows suit. Do you know why these behaviors occur?"

Aaron slowly nodded, understanding dawning on him. "Because where there is water, there is life," he said, completing Sarah's thought.

"Exactly," Sarah agreed, a satisfied smile spreading across her face. "I'm sure I don't have to finish this story for you."

"I see where you're heading with it," Aaron replied, nodding.

"And that is why we bear the name of the Red Lizard Guild," Sarah concluded.

Aaron silently crossed his arms. "So, are you the Ruby or the Rose?"

"We're both, naturally," Sarah responded, "But it depends on who we're working with. Sometimes, they don't discover the truth until it's too late."

"Hm," he nodded, leaning back against the coach. "It was a nice story," Aaron said, a yawn taking over his voice. "I'd love to hear another sometime."

"Sure," Sarah replied with a smile.



Aaron's eyes snapped open, jolted awake by a sharp ache in his shoulders.

How long had he been asleep?

He couldn't recall, but one thing was certain—he needed to find a better book to occupy his time with. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but the dry, tedious accounts of his family's dealings with the Red Lizard Guild were thoroughly uninteresting. Perhaps a tale of heroism and adventure would be appropriate, or maybe something to help prepare him further for this world.

But that was a thought for later.

It seemed to be early morning, and Aaron was surprised to find the caravan had come to a stop on a peaceful grassy plain. Outside, he saw a blur of green grass and scattered trees across the uneven terrain. He felt a strong urge to stretch his legs and soak in the fresh air and sunlight.

"Finally roused from your slumber, I see," Sarah commented, dismounting her horse with ease. She gestured towards the door, her intentions clear, but Aaron was already making a beeline towards the exit, eager to escape the confines of the cramped carriage.

"How long have I been out?" Aaron asked groggily, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and stretching his limbs with a satisfying yawn.

"Roughly seven hours," Sarah replied, mimicking his movements with a graceful stretch. "We'll be establishing a camp for a brief spell. We still have several hours left before we reach the next township, and we can't afford to take any risks. Besides, it provides some of our guards with an opportunity to catch their breath, though the scouts are still on duty."



Aaron raised his brow, admiring their unwavering dedication. “No respite for the fatigued, it seems.”

“Once we arrive at the town, they’ll be granted a longer chance to rest,” Sarah reassured him. “It’s our established protocol. The scouts scour the surrounding area for any threats—wild animals, assassins, or otherwise. Bandits in particular like to pilfer our cargo.”

“What do you do when a scout locates an assassin?” Aaron inquired.

“Capture them, naturally,” Sarah stated matter-of-factly.

“And then?” Aaron pressed.

“We eliminate them,” Sarah bluntly answered.

“Just like that? I’d take them out to dinner, first,” Aaron joked.

“It serves as a warning to others,” Sarah explained coolly. “That’s how we have operated since our inception. If it isn’t broken, there’s no need to fix it.”

“Oh, I understand, believe me,” he acknowledged. “I’d just be mindful of the possibility of retaliation.”

He mentioned this from experience, having dealt with cartels in the past. Assuming that assassin guilds or bandits operated similarly, people could be incredibly inventive with their messages. One time while undercover, he even found a human head inside a Christmas box.

“That’s why we have you and your family on our side,” she chuckled. “You’re our insurance in case things get ugly.”

“And here I thought you were supposed to be the ones protecting me.”

As provisions were distributed, a campfire lit up, offering comforting warmth. A river flowed nearby, its constant churn doing well to pair with the crackle of the fire.

The guards interrupted Aaron’s thoughts, setting up a makeshift dining area from crates and scavenged wood. His meal, stale bread and a small cheese block, left him underwhelmed. But hey, he’d had worse.

Settling onto the plush grass, Aaron gestured for Sarah to join him. With a grin, she accepted the invitation and nestled beside him. Tearing off chunks of the hard bread, Aaron posed the question, “Have you always been in this line of work?”

“Getting curious about little old me?” Sarah played.

“Just a bit,” Aaron nodded.

“I’m not anyone special; it’s the only life I’ve ever known,” Sarah explained between bites of cheese and bread. “My dad might seem like a glutton, but it’s just a front he’s perfected over time. While he was one of the pioneers in establishing trade routes across the kingdoms, we always tread carefully not to overstep our boundaries. Your family gives us a unique advantage.”

“How so?” he prompted, interested.

“Standing behind them, we remain invisible, which provides us with some security,” she continued. “Trading is always a web of relations, especially with



the Second or First Kingdom, but can stay somewhat hidden with the Aevum. It allows us to breathe and explore opportunities for expansion.”

Aaron pondered for a moment. “You’ve known the people in my family for a long time,” he began. “Do you believe they’re good people?”

“I don’t think it’s so easy to divide people into good and bad,” she mused, staring at the fire as she turned a chunk of bread over in her hand. “But I think they have people’s best interests in mind, and that’s good. When you’re caught between a war, however, not much you can do.”

“I haven’t heard about any current war,” Aaron commented.

“Right now it’s all just politics, but it’s on the horizon. Even the commoners can feel it looming,” Sarah explained with a tinge of melancholy. “With the ruler of the Third Kingdom struggling with failing health, people are making moves for when he finally passes away. Without a stable monarch, this kingdom is a prime target for conflict.”

“Doesn’t the king have an heir to take his place?” Aaron inquired.

“He does, a singular grandson, but it’s common knowledge that he’s weak,” she sighed. “Both in magic and ambition, he simply lacks the drive that the kingdom needs, and those shortcomings have raised doubts about his fitness for the throne. That’s not to say magic is a condition for rule, but for the Kingdom *of* Magic... you could say there’s an expectation.”

“This war then...” Aaron pondered. “It’s between the other kingdoms and ours?”

“In a way,” she said. “Historically, the kingdoms’ royal bloodlines have always been what determined ruling power. But Asteria is in a precarious position. This kingdom is still new and growing. House Fiari is respected, but among the old kingdoms, they don’t garner the same level of veneration. Some align with his vision, but others plot against him. And while he understands this, he can’t thwart their plans.”

“So the throne has multiple legitimate claimants,” Aaron concluded, slightly surprised by the revelation.

“That’s one way to look at it. One king usurps another, and the cycle begins anew,” she replied with a secretive smile. “But magic serves as an equalizer. It’s what this kingdom was built on, and it’s how its future will be shaped.”

It seemed that, even in this world, traditional notions of rulership still held considerable sway. He had dealt with similar dynamics before—dictators, a king or two, some presidents, and even a supreme leader. This wasn’t new to him. Where Aaron’s mind went was on how the Aevum might play into this upcoming power struggle. Sylvia had mentioned that they didn’t desire the throne for themselves, but if faced with the choice of rising to power or risking someone else taking control, he knew which path he would choose.

“So what motivates you to continue your father’s work?” Aaron asked, shifting the conversation.



"We came from modest roots, barely scraping by in the slums of Sentoros," Sarah shared. "I can remember when we finally left Gatam. I was young at the time, so the details are a bit fuzzy, but the first time we crossed the Mirage Desert is one of my oldest memories."

"That's impressive. I hear the journey isn't easy," he acknowledged, astonished by her revelation.

"To say 'I' did much is overselling it," Sarah lightly admitted. "The sand, the dry air—I *hated* it. But my father believed it to be our best chance at a better life. He did it for me."

"Well, it sounds like he was right," Aaron noted.

"Yeah," Sarah smiled, her gaze reflective. "I didn't realize that for a long time, but he's always thought about me, even when we weren't on good terms. Even when I abandoned the business in pursuit of glory, he still supported me."

"Did you find any success in that?"

"Somewhat, but those days are long behind me," Sarah shrugged. "Glory is truly worthwhile only when it's pursued for someone other than oneself. Otherwise, you risk falling into the same trap as the Second Kingdom."

"Mmm," Aaron nodded. "I can understand that."

Sarah paused mid-bite, her expression thoughtful. "You know, my father's dream has always been to establish a town under the banner of the Red Lizard. Nothing big, just a small slice of the pie."

"And what's your goal now?" Aaron inquired.

"To help make that reality," she replied, not hesitating at all. "I don't know if it'll ever happen, but after all he's done for me, he deserves to be happy."

"I'm sure it will," Aaron affirmed.

"I hope so," she mused, glancing toward Isaac who was busy tending to the horses. "But even with our... condition, I can tell he's running out of time."

Condition?

Aaron considered her meaning for a moment, quickly coming to the realization that whatever gave Sarah her youth, Isaac must've shared the same circumstance. After all, he only looked in his mid-forties, and if Sarah was as old as she claimed, then he must've been much older too. Whatever it was, however, it sounded like it wasn't an eternal solution.

"Well, if I'm ever in the position, I'll do what I can to help you," Aaron said.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, now," Sarah gave a cheeky smile.

"I'm sure I can keep this one," Aaron nodded. "It seems you're already on your way there though, with your ties to my family."

"Let's hope," she smiled. "And you? Do you plan to follow in your family's footsteps?"

"I'm not sure," Aaron admitted, setting his dish aside. "I've always stuck to what I've known, but I have the chance to do something different. I'm hoping the academy will help me figure out what I want."



Sarah laughed, giving him a gentle pat on the back. “In that sense, you’re still quite young. Don’t worry too much about it. Let your actions speak for themselves, and your story will be told by those you haven’t met.”

Aaron remained quiet, lost in thought while Sarah continued her exploration. Reclining on the grass with his hands behind his head, he gazed at the clear sky. Sarah’s words had given him a sense of clarity—they made sense. There was no need to rush things. Unlike his days as an assassin, he didn’t have to stay hidden all the time.

Hey lay on the ground, enjoying the serenity of his surroundings. It was peaceful here, and he felt reminded of home.

But not long after, the face of Vendin appeared looking down above him, blocking the sky.

“Finished eating?” he asked. “Then get up.”

“Hmm?” Aaron took a second to grasp the situation.

“Surely you don’t intend to go back to sleep so soon,” Vendin criticized.

“Can’t a man get any peace around here?” Aaron shook his head lightly.

Aaron worked himself up to his feet, and Vendin turned to guide him.

“Come on,” he urged. “You’ve got training to do.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The deserts, a harsh and merciless land where the scant wildlife is as deadly as it is rare. Nature, or the absence of it, will claim the lives of the unprepared, but for those who unknowingly tread into the territory of a sand worm or fall prey to a gaostalker's trap, death comes swiftly and surely.

— *To Walk Among the Sands*

“Double Dilate.” Sylvia poised, rushing towards Eric at twice her normal speed. The air around her seemed to warp as she moved, creating a blur of motion that was almost impossible to keep up with. Eric, on the other hand, remained steadfast, his massive frame barreling toward her like a relentless force of nature.

Their fists collided with a thunderous impact, sending shockwaves across the training grounds. Despite Sylvia's slender build, she packed a powerful punch that landed square on Eric's chin. Determined to gain the upper hand, Sylvia launched a flurry of kicks, each one aimed at knocking Eric off balance. But Eric's unwavering strength proved to be a formidable obstacle, effortlessly absorbing the blows with what Sylvia assumed to be Tempering.

Interesting. She smiled.

Eric lunged at Sylvia for a chokehold, but she swiftly slipped away and counterattacked. With quick reflexes, Sylvia locked onto Eric, and he felt an unusual energy coursing through him, as if an invisible force had suddenly immobilized him. Despite his efforts to break free, he moved in slow motion.

“Nullification: Umbra,” Eric grunted.

With a flick of his wrist, a dark bracelet dissipated the oppressive energy restraining him. His speed had significantly improved since their last battle, and he was now faster and stronger than ever before. Months of rigorous training in the Mirage Desert had honed his abilities to perfection. Sylvia raised an eyebrow, impressed by Eric's newfound power.

"I won't deny you've grown stronger," she remarked, "but have you also gotten any smarter?"

Eric just laughed, his smirk growing wider. "Well, I might not be as cunning as you," he admitted, "but I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve."

With a thunderous clap of his fists, a shimmering ring of magic materialized beneath Eric. Sylvia thought she was well-acquainted with this technique, but this time, something felt different.

"Spellcast: Black Bastion," he declared. Three intricately woven layers of magic coalesced around him. The first was Tempering. The second she recognized as an even more formidable defensive application of mana that Eric had developed long ago, an almost armor-like hardness forming. The third, however, was a mysterious and unfamiliar force.

A dark glove of magic formed around Eric's right hand and spread up his forearm. Puzzlingly, it seemed solid as if made from a physical material, but at the same time it appeared absent of edges, confusing the eyes as they struggled to determine where the construct started and ended.

"Well, that's something new," Sylvia noted, her eyes drawn to the third layer of magic and the peculiar bracers. "The result of your time in the desert?"

Sylvia was aware of the fact that some Maran tribes specialized in illusionary abilities, so she speculated that what she witnessed now could've been the byproduct of that, but she wasn't sure.

"Not quite," Eric said with a sly grin. "Something of my own invention. Lucky for me, it only cost a bit of mana."

Sylvia arched an eyebrow, intrigued. "I'll have to update your profile, then."

"You'll be the first to see it in action," Eric added, a spark of excitement in his voice.

"In that case, no wonder you challenged me to a spar." Sylvia grinned, her eyes gleaming. "This is going to be fun."

"I'm ready when you are," Eric challenged.

"Triple Tempo," she whispered.

Time bent around her. In a blink, her movements sharpened, her strength tripled, and magic roared to life within her, cloaking her in a vivid aura of surging power.

It was one of Sylvia's greatest powers, amplifying every aspect of her being.

As she squared off against Eric, Sylvia began to uncover the true nature of his mysterious third layer. With every exchange of blows, she felt her strength slowly drain away and her mana slowly dwindle. It was as if the third layer was actively neutralizing some of her abilities, siphoning away her mana instead of fully dispelling it. Eric, clearly drawing on Irene's teachings, proved a formidable opponent in close combat.

Battling Eric's overwhelming power and relentless strikes, Sylvia barely held her ground, deflecting attacks and avoiding direct contact as much as possible.



Then, as Eric's arm narrowly missed her, she seized the opportunity to breach his formidable defense.

But Eric smirked as the shadowy gauntlet vanished.

Immediately amid her progressing attack, Sylvia increased her Foresight, and she noticed that it had shifted below onto his leg—a leg that was coming straight for her.

Clever.

Since Bastion could only shield part of his body, Eric shifted it as needed to cover his defenses. Sylvia knew the pattern well from their past battles. But that familiarity was exactly what he'd used against her—twisting it with this new, shadowed version of his ability.

It was coming straight for her.

"Quad Quickness!" Sylvia called, tapping into her next tier of speed. She barely slipped away in time, falling back to reassess. Her eyes locked onto the strange piece of armor, tracking its glide as it curled back around Eric's arm.

"Figured that wouldn't catch you off guard," Eric said, clicking his tongue. "But don't worry—I've got plenty more where that came from."

"Very well," she smiled. "I suppose I'll have to take you more seriously."

Eric was powerful. In addition to his magic, his physical strength was impressive, the only person within their family able to match him being Irene.

If she was going to overpower him, she'd need to push herself to even greater heights. With a flick of her wrist, she summoned another layer of magic to bolster her abilities. "Quintuple Quintessence," she said, steady and focused. Speed and force surged through her. The mana would burn fast at this pace—but that was the cost. And she was willing to pay it.

The match escalated with every blow, each clash sharper than the last. But as the dust began to settle, the outcome was clear.

Their fists met one final time—then Sylvia froze. Her arm was caught, locked in place. Eric's dark gauntlet gripped her fist, anchoring her in place and draining the last of her tempo. Her speed vanished. He'd caught her clean.

Sylvia still had mana left—but chose not to spend it. No use draining herself for a lost match.

"Alright, it's yours," she said, unclenching her free hand and raising it in surrender.

Eric released his grip, the dark energy fading as her arm dropped free. "So?" he asked, grinning. "Not bad, right?"

"I'm impressed," she admitted, meeting his smile. "But don't get too cocky. Next time, I won't be so easy to catch off guard."

"We'll see about that."

Despite her restraint, the training grounds had been left in shambles, the mana-reinforced structures were no match for the sheer force of their errant



blows. Wooden beams were splintered, stone bricks were shattered, and the earth was torn apart by their relentless barrages of attacks.

"I suppose you were right, Eric," Sylvia said, surveying the wreckage around them. "Our training ground's long overdue for an upgrade."

Eric smirked, wiping sweat from his brow. "Tried to warn you," he said, a hint of amusement in his voice. "But this? This is nothing. You should see the mess when Adam and Irene go at it."

He let out a low chuckle, shaking his head as if recalling the chaos. "Actually... better you don't. Not exactly safe to be around. But they still drop by more than you do—and way more than Aaron ever did before his last birthday."

"You know I love the thrill of battle as much as you," Sylvia said with a sigh. "But times change. Our reach keeps growing, and so do my responsibilities. I'm not quite the fighter I used to be. I guess that's the cost of financial success."

"Fair enough," Eric said, nodding. "Actually—on that note—you might want to hear about something I came across in the Mirage Desert."

"Ah, yes," Sylvia's eyes brightened as she spoke. "How was training with the Maek'kah Nora Fokri anyway?"

"Remarkable," Eric simply put. "Although similar to my Bastion on a fundamental level, their techniques are incredibly versatile. It offered quite a fresh perspective on how to use my abilities, as you witnessed."

Sylvia nodded in approval, saying, "I'm pleased to see that your journey has proven fruitful."

"I've updated our maps with the locations we explored during our stalks," Eric elaborated. "Additionally, they were generous enough to share the spoils from the beasts I helped slay. The Mara have various uses for them, but I didn't have the chance to learn much in that regard. They're in our storage if you ever want to take a look."

"Excellent," Sylvia nodded.

"Anyway, like I said, I have other news to share," Eric began, his tone firm and serious. "I've come across some... peculiar rumors concerning the Desert King."

Sylvia responded casually, "There have always been plenty of rumors surrounding him."

"Of course, but this one is recent," Eric affirmed. "And it may pertain to us."

"Oh?" Sylvia raised an intrigued eyebrow. "Well, let's hear it."

"He seems to be purchasing beastkin slaves," Eric revealed. "A large amount."

Sylvia furrowed her brow in thought. "Slaves? What for? Tora Kra'ah has been stable for... well... who knows how long? According to the Historians at least, the city has remained in an equilibrium for centuries."

"Indeed. I found it strange too," Eric agreed. "And the fact that they're beastkin means he either can't use his own workforce... or that he doesn't want even his citizens to know what he's up to."

"Hmm..." Sylvia contemplated, narrowing her eyes.



Kra'ah Vanir, unchallenged ruler of the Mirage Desert, never to her knowledge had much ambition to expand his reach. In fact, he never even concerned himself with those outside of his rule. After all, he already held dominion over the desert's sands, a region as large as the whole of the Second Kingdom.

He'd already created his own perfect kingdom.

What more did he want?

Sylvia theorized that, with the influx of humans into Tora Kra'ah over the past couple centuries, the city could've finally been starting to reach the hard population capacity of its well-defined border. Thus, he had a necessity for labor to expand and accommodate.

But still, why did he need *beastkin* slaves for that?

"How certain are you of this information?" Sylvia asked, voice measured.

"It first came to me from a trusted source," Eric informed her. "And then I went to confirm it myself."

She gave a small nod, barely reacting. "Of course."

"I accompanied villagers of the tribe on one of their excursions to Tora Kra'ah selling chitin, meat, and other resources they harvest," he began to explain. "We stayed a few nights there, and I spent my time stalking the palace's entrances. Sure enough, envoy slavers visited him. Their 'merchandise' was shrouded, and they were dressed in plain attire not belonging to any slaver guild, but I could tell they weren't from the Mirage Desert."

"Mm. So they're keeping it quiet," Sylvia noted.

"My thoughts exactly," Eric nodded. "I captured one of them afterward and asked about their reasons for visiting the Desert King."

Sylvia leaned in and inquired, "And what did he say?"

"He claimed it was for negotiating a trade deal involving spices," Eric scoffed. "But obviously that was a lie."

Sylvia nodded in agreement, saying, "Indeed. We work with most of the spice in the third kingdom; we would have at least heard something about it."

"Mhm," Eric concurred, snapping his fingers. "He wouldn't divulge his allegiance, but it's clear there's something amiss."

"Agreed. Tora Kra'ah is already self-sufficient, and his Maran citizens practically worship him," she considered, running several more dead-end possibilities in her mind.

"Perhaps he's considering becoming more active, increasing trade," Eric suggested.

"There'd be no reason for him to be secretive about that, though," Sylvia countered. "He has nothing to fear or hide by expanding his diplomatic reach."

Eric stroked his chin in contemplation. "You have a point. Even if he were purchasing slaves, why bother hiding it? No one would question him."



Sylvia nodded. “Which leads me to believe there’s more to this than just a simple transaction,” Sylvia continued thoughtfully. “There has to be something deeper at play here.”

“But trade relations with him have remained positive since the Third Kingdom’s founding,” Eric countered. “The only thing that’s different, I suppose, is us. The kingdom continues to grow.”

“Hmm... I’m afraid you might be on the right track,” Sylvia said with a frown. “There are only two reasons to buy slaves and keep it hidden—either for expansion, or to quietly bolster their own borders with new projects.”

“And the only real route for slaves is through the Second Kingdom,” Eric said. “It’s unlikely he’d find anywhere else to source that many.”

Sylvia nodded. “Agreed. Which suggests the Second Kingdom is stirring. With King Bel’s health in decline, perhaps they’re sensing weakness in Asteria.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard about the Second Kingdom’s push into the North,” Eric added. “It’s being led by Exoren and Dahnari—Gatam’s two most powerful houses. No doubt they’re after more influence, enough to rival ours.”

Sylvia nodded firmly. “They likely realize that the South will soon be under our control.”

“But if I were in their position,” Eric mused, “the easier play would be to stop us before we gain momentum. Maybe that’s the goal with the desert—quietly forming an alliance to cut off our trade routes and strangle growth. An open alliance with the Maran King would never pass the First Kingdom’s eye, which is likely why they’re keeping it under wraps.”

Possible.

Sylvia weighed the scenario in her mind. If the Second Kingdom’s goal was to maintain the balance of power, then stunting the Third Kingdom’s growth would certainly serve that purpose—but it wouldn’t be easy. Asteria had only joined the empire out of a desire for unity. It had never depended on the old kingdoms.

She knew that Asteria’s royal family sought to keep the peace, but if it came down to it, splitting from the empire was a course of action they could’ve taken, and the Aevum would be there at their side to support them in that endeavor.

Whatever the case, their priority remained securing the Vasir Mountains.

“They won’t be able to stop us from taking the mountains,” Sylvia definitely said. “The expedition approaches soon.”

“Have they been trying to?” Eric asked.

“Not directly, no,” Sylvia replied. “They may know we plan to advance at some point, but they don’t know just how soon it’s coming.”

Eric nodded slowly, his thoughts turning. “Then the real risk is if King Bel dies before we succeed,” he said. “If that happens, the Dahnari or Exoren might try to claim the throne. And they have the strength to make it more than just a bid.”

“Unfortunately, that is a real possibility,” Sylvia admitted, her expression darkening. “But the Torelli understand the value of peace. If the Second Kingdom



tries to take control, they won't just sit back and let it happen—not if they want to keep us from cutting ties with them entirely. That kind of shift wouldn't be in their favor either.”

“So, Desert King Kra'ah Vanir starts making some noise at the same time House Exoren announces their expedition,” Eric chuckled. “There couldn't be a bigger coincidence.”

“Indeed, something is going on between them,” Sylvia nodded thoughtfully. “If the Exoren are the ones supplying him with slaves, then they must believe that he can help them in some way. As for whatever he needs the labor for... there's no telling.”

“I have some friends there keeping me updated, but so far they haven't discovered anything,” Eric reported.

“Do you think he may be raising an army of his own?” Sylvia asked for his insight. “At one point he commanded an army of Mara, didn't he?”

“That's what the rumors say,” Eric confirmed. “But you wanna know what else I heard about that?”

“Of course,” Sylvia implored, intrigued.

“The Re'n I hunted with wouldn't divulge much,” Eric admitted, “but from what I understand, all his forces were wiped out, and it happened more than once.”

The entire army?

Sylvia's eyes widened. “Do you know against whom?”

Eric shook his head. “They refused to tell me anything more. I think they're afraid to.”

“Is that so...?” Sylvia pondered the significance of this new information. “Well, army or not, he still holds significant power due to his central position on the continent. Asterian trade with the rest of the Human Empire relies heavily on him allowing us to pass through the desert.”

“So if he ever decides to cut us off...” Eric proposed the thought.

“Then our business prospects take a massive hit.”

Eric stroked his chin as he thought. “We do have maritime trade as a fallback,” he pointed out. “But I agree. If the Second Kingdom is behind this, then that may be their aim—slowing us down while they conquer the North.”

Hmm.

Sylvia mused, the entire situation putting a strain on her mind. It was irksome, but as long as their expedition to the South proved a success, they'd still hold the upper hand.

“When are you heading to the Golden City?” Sylvia asked Eric.

“Soon,” he assured. “Just a couple weeks more.”

“Good,” she nodded. “The sooner we bolster our trade presence there and to the old kingdoms, the better. They may think twice if their actions jeopardize their own economy.”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Exoren rose to prominence through the blood and battles that birthed Gatam, the Second Kingdom. Their unwavering ingenuity and determination later elevated them to greater heights, as they became the first to master the subjugation of Beastkin, shaping the course of history with the dawn of a new era of slavery.

— Historian Order, *The Second Kingdom: A Crucible of War*

Aaron's eyes flew open, ripped from his slumber by a piercing scream that echoed through the air. He sprang up, heart racing as he absorbed the chaotic scene in front of him. A scout lay sprawled on the ground, his neat uniform stained a grim, natural red. Blood pooled at his stomach where one hand was held, and the other arm dangled limply, severed at the elbow. His body was covered in gashes, some spanning feet in length.

It must've been sheer willpower and adrenaline keeping him alive.

"What happened?" Sarah exclaimed, her voice urgent as she rushed to the wounded man's side. "Get our healer and supplies now!" The mercenaries sprang into action, their training kicking in as they swiftly armed themselves and gathered any medicinal supplies within reach. Meanwhile, Aaron's eyes scanned their surroundings, searching for any potential threats that might be lurking nearby.

"I doubt he'll make it," Vendin simply remarked, a touch of sadness in his voice as he stared over the battered face of the injured man. "Wounds like this... with what we have here, there's no recovering."

"Quiet, Vendin," Sarah snapped.

As the man struggled onto his feet, stumbling forward as best he could in his debilitated state, people rushed over to help him.

"There's a leak somewhere," Sarah cursed. "Someone found out our plans."

"I'll check for any signs of movement. If there's somebody else nearby the camp, I'll find out," Vendin stated, radiating with an almost tangible vigor of focus. "I won't be long, but keep Aaron safe. No doubt it's him they're after."

Quickly he set off to scout ahead, moving with such speed that he disappeared in a blur.

Meanwhile, the injured scout leaned heavily on a guard for support, determined to move closer despite his weakened state. Gathering all his strength, he readied himself to speak what could be his last words. His breathing was heavily labored, agony laden in each gasp of air, but he managed to convey a message: "Brand..."

Aaron leaned closer, and so did Sarah.

"The Branders are here," the scout whispered, his voice raspy.

"What do they want with *us*?" Sarah gritted her teeth, clearly frustrated.

The scout's trembling finger pointed at Aaron, and the blood on it seemed to be a silent accusation.

Vendin was right. Damn it—

"Can you still speak?" Aaron's voice sliced through the tension.

The wounded man made a feeble attempt to respond, his lips moving silently as he struggled for breath. But his voice abandoned him, his eyelids drooping shut as death finally claimed him. A group of people rushed over to attend to him, yet Aaron remained rooted where he stood, his face twisting as he watched the scout's lifeless body collapse onto the ground.

The Branders— Why had they singled him out?

Aaron had witnessed more deaths than he cared to count, but a unique pang of guilt struck him now. This man had died because of him, not *at* his hand but *erving* it, and the feeling of that realization was... heavy.

He had never been significant enough to warrant protection before—he was usually the person on the other side. And being in this position now, he could feel the anger start to build inside of him, an all-consuming, doleful rage.

"*Someone* tell me," Aaron spoke with a force of authority. "Who are these Branders?"

Sarah's expression turned serious, her voice adopting a solemn tone. "I understand your thoughts, but these assassins are not to be taken lightly."

"You're right. This is no light matter," Aaron said. "And I'll make sure they know that."

Sarah shook her head. "Look, the Branders are a formidable mercenary group that operates all over Asteria, but they strictly handle monster subjugation. If they're hunting *us*, then someone paid them handsomely—enough to live their entire lives without any worries."

"Then whoever ordered this is targeting my family," Aaron said, heart pounding as he tried to steady his voice. He hadn't expected retaliation to come this fast—not so soon after crossing Trost's borders.



"Exactly, they're trying to hurt *you* to get at them," Sarah replied, her tone grim. "I can't let that happen."

Aaron's hands curled into fists. "So you're planning to face them head-on?"

"I don't see another way," she said.

"Then I'm not sitting out."

Sarah narrowed her eyes on him. "Absolutely not," she firmly denied. "Trust Vendin and me to handle it. This is not a situation to risk your safety on."

"And what do you expect me to do? Just sit back?" Aaron scoffed.

"Their objective is to capture or kill you," Sarah replied. "You're walking straight into their trap if you go to face them."

"And what about you?" Aaron shot back. "If you die—or even get seriously hurt—they'll just come for me anyway. It makes no sense for me to sit here doing nothing when I can help."

Before Sarah could answer, the rush of air signaled Vendin's arrival. He landed beside them atop his Windstreak Hawk, his voice clipped and focused.

"No signs of anyone within the perimeter escaping from our side," he reported. "The chance of the mole being inside our camp is probably zero, but I spotted three people ahead waiting for us. They're tracking us at a distance somehow. Sneaking by isn't an option."

"Well there you go," Aaron said to Sarah. "All the more reason I should come with you."

Sarah shook her head. "I can't let you do that."

"No, Aaron has a point," Vendin interjected, cutting through their debate. "He should come with us, even if he isn't fighting them."

"What?" Sarah turned to him, taken aback. "Are you out of your mind?"

"We need to get him to Tenebris," Vendin said. "If we turn back now, Aaron could miss his window to the Floating Academy entirely. And we don't exactly have reinforcements we can count on here—stalling or retreating isn't on the table."

"What about your hawks?" Sarah said. "They can transform—you and Aaron could fly ahead. If the guards and I create a diversion, it might buy you the time you need to reach Tenebris."

"And leave you behind to get slaughtered?" Vendin snapped. "They'll know we ran. That might even be exactly what they want. Even if we escape, they'll need something to bring back. That means you and your crew."

"Then we're already in an impossible scenario," she said after a pause. "Best we cut our losses while we can. If we can at least give you a head start, that'll be good enough."

Vendin's jaw tightened. "Splitting up only makes us easier targets. I only saw three ahead, but they weren't hiding. They *wanted* to be seen. There could be more out there, waiting for us to scatter. If they knock us out of the sky, it's over."



“Even so,” Sarah countered, “if they’re hidden, they’ll reveal themselves the moment we act. Whether we stay together or not, we’ll be outnumbered either way.”

“Trust me, it’s better to fight them on the ground than to have a battle in the skies,” Vendin affirmed, “I don’t see us escaping this situation without some sacrifices, but if we stick together, we have the highest chance of moving ahead.”

“Argh...” Sarah grumbled, clearly considering the situation in its entirety.

Sarah paused, her mouth twitching, but she refrained from speaking.

But there really weren’t any other options. The guards were hired to disguise them as regular trade convoys under the pretext of deterring common bandits or thieves from pillaging their cargo. But that’s just what they were—regular guards. If Aaron wasn’t skilled enough to handle a fight against these Branders, these guards *definitely* weren’t, evident enough by the already dead one lying next to them.

“Fine, you’re right,” Sarah sighed, resigning her position. “The closer he is, the safer he’ll be. But he’s not fighting. He’ll stay back with the guards while we handle the threat, and if things start to go south, you need to try to get him out of there.”

“Agreed,” Vendin said, conceding to her terms. “There’s still a risk they shoot them down, but if it comes to the worst, using all three of my hawks might be enough to get him to Dventos. He’ll be safe once he reaches the city.”

“*Tch*. Don’t I get a say in this? I’m not just going to stand around while you handle everything,” Aaron derided, frustration clear in his voice. “Who do you think I am?”

Maybe his pride was clouding his judgment, or maybe it was the strange fact that someone was so determined to protect him, but this was the first time he’d genuinely been provoked in this world.

Vendin looked at Aaron discerningly. “Do you believe you can actually do something against them?”

“I can’t be sure, but if anything, me not fighting only makes our odds of survival worse,” Aaron reasoned. “At the very least, I can provide support at a distance.”

“If you’re not confident in your abilities, then you shouldn’t be fighting at all,” Sarah made clear with a pointed finger. “You’ll only slow us down.”

“And how can you be so sure *you* can beat them?” Aaron countered.

“I’m not, but Vendin and I at least know our limits better than you do,” Sarah’s gaze was steady. “Look, I can’t stop you, but you need to understand just how important you are. If you die, then your family retaliates, and that could lead to a war. But if you escape alive, even if the rest of us don’t make it, at least the casualties won’t be as bad.”



Aaron paused for a moment, considering her words. Although he understood where Sarah was coming from, he didn't like it. He couldn't bear to do nothing while others risked their own lives to protect him.

He wouldn't be useless.

"I won't be the type of person who lets the people protecting me die in vain when I could've done something," Aaron declared. "If I flee and you don't make it, *I'm* the one who has to live with that. And that's assuming I even make it alone."

Aaron had taken plenty of lives in his time, but there was a difference between being the one to end someone's life and being the reason someone's life was ended.

"I'm fighting with you, and you won't be able to change my mind," Aaron affirmed, determined in his resolve. "You can have your disagreements, but I'm going to do what I need to. It's my name they're calling for, after all. These Branders will understand the consequences of threatening an Aevum."

Sarah exhaled a defeated sigh, but Vendin gave a slight smile and raised his eyebrows.

"Well, looks like he's made his decision," Vendin said.

"Aaron, if you're going to do this, just please don't be arrogant," she said, meeting his eyes. "This is not a place where you can afford it."

"I hear you," Aaron nodded, "but regardless of the odds, I'll keep moving forward."

Sarah hesitated at his reply, but she gave an acquiescent smile and nodded in solidarity, unsheathing her rapier with a graceful flourish.

"Now that that's settled," Vendin addressed the group, "we'll be stepping deep into enemy territory. Be ready for whatever they throw at us."



The clinking bells echoed across the open field, a sinister summons drawing them nearer. Three unfamiliar figures stood on a blood-stained rock amidst the desolation. The forest clearing below cast a glimmer in their vigilant eyes as they observed Aaron from the sloped hill above. Their waiting presence gnawed at him, fueling his frustration. It felt as though they were looking down on him, mocking his shortcomings. Nearby, he spotted the other two scouts they had dispatched earlier, their bodies ravaged by sharp claws.

Aaron approached the three strangers with an intent stride, Sylvia's weapon held firmly in his grasp. Beside him, Sarah and Vendin stood ready. As they drew nearer, Aaron's eyes scanned the area for any signs of traps or hidden dangers.

But to his surprise, he found none. Even with the use of Insight, The Branders had made no effort to hide their presence or set any physical or magical traps—or at least none he could detect. It was either supreme confidence in their abilities or complete indifference to being uncovered.



"Who sent you for me?" Aaron demanded, he replied with a note of challenge.

"It matters not who sent us," the stranger replied in a rough voice. He was draped in heavy cloth armor, but the metallic staff he wielded, adorned with circular rings and black studs, clearly marked him as a mage of some sort.

Aaron's stance stiffened, his arms spreading defiantly as he locked eyes with the stranger. "Explain the massacre of the scouts," he demanded. "You're here for me, aren't you?"

The man laughed, a twisted sense of amusement in his voice. "So naive of the world..." he mocked, his tone dripping with malice. "But yes, your life is the prize we seek."

"Then you've crossed the line," Aaron responded. "I won't go down without a fight."

"Neither will we," the mage echoed through his mask. "Our employer's orders are clear: you must be eliminated. Taking you out will deliver a heavy blow to the Aevum family."

"You underestimate my family," Aaron remained composed as he took a determined step forward. "My death won't change a thing for the Aevum, but it seems there's no convincing you, is there?"

The mage sneered. "You talk big for someone your age, but your words are meaningless," he said, his voice dripping with incredulity. "In the end, you're just another killer like the rest of your family. I'll snuff out your life before it even has a chance to matter."

"And how much are *your* words worth?" Aaron shot back.

"Enough," the mage snapped. "Talk is over."

"Then let's speak in a language you'll better understand," Aaron replied.

Aaron gave a glance to Sarah and Vendin, and immediately, Sarah raised her rapier. Vendin let out a sharp whistle, and his three Windstreak Hawks emerged, sailing towards the enemy collective. With his weapon, Aaron gave a sharp, commanding point up toward their opponents at the top of the hill, and the guards they had brought behind them charged forward. Their strength couldn't compare to his own, but their numbers would overwhelm the enemy just enough for them to prepare.

As Aaron and his allies climbed the hill, the dark-robed mage made a forceful gesture, slamming his staff into the ground with great force. Aaron's senses were on high alert as he activated all of his magical techniques in response, bracing himself for the potential impact.

Despite his still unmastered control of the basics, Aaron possessed enough experience by now to channel his energy with an adroit precision, and as the mage's spell washed over him, Aaron stood resolute, radiating raw energy.

He gritted his teeth as he pushed back against the force of the spell with all his might.



Although he stood his ground, the guards that had gotten closest to the mage collapsed clutching their ears, and Aaron realized what had happened as he registered the mild ringing sensation in his ears.

Sound magic.

To the guards, it was incapacitating. Similarly, for Vendin's birds, they barely managed to turn away from the noise before crashing into the ground. Sarah hurriedly began preparing her own ability, but it required some preparation.

Their second adversary, a man dressed in deep crimson garb that flowed with each step, blitzed towards Vendin as he rushed to recover his hawks. The two met each other with a flurry of mana-charged attacks in close combat. Despite his large size, the man moved with an impressive speed, combining sheer raw power with well-controlled movements. Vendin expertly combatted his opponent in bouts, primarily defending against them as he worked to protect his birds.

The final assassin, a woman, dropped down into a crouch and muttered something under her breath. Though she bore no visible weapon, the manifestation of a fierce animal enveloped her form in a shroud of mana, akin to a transparent and breathable suit of armor.

Aaron blinked, and in that moment, she vanished without a trace.

In an instant, several guards in front of Aaron were rendered lifeless on the ground, unable to react to the assassin's blinding speed. Even with his Foresight, Aaron couldn't keep up.

The mana-hardened avatar cloaked her in the form of what looked to be a panther, her claws razor-sharp as she sliced through the guards with lethal precision. Aaron's heart raced with adrenaline as he took a step back, but he knew that retreating would've only put him in greater danger. Ready himself, Aaron stood his ground beside Sarah, who had just completed her spell in the nick of time.

"Area Magic: Grand Tournament."

A green circle of pure magic oscillated from her feet, quickly swelling to cover the entire area. Aaron immediately felt his body tense up, but it was invigorating, like he'd been bestowed with a strength he had never found before. She got into a considerably tight stance, her weapon directed towards the enemies before them.

Wary of the spell, the person fighting Vendin swiftly retreated to regroup with his allies, giving Vendin the opportunity to do the same.

In a commanding tone, Sarah laid out the rules.

"Listen closely," she said. "You will select up to five combatants for your team. We'll match you with as many people as possible, up to ten total. Those not selected will be displaced outside the tournament grounds."

She paused to give time for the information to sink in, then continued, "This tournament ends when either team has no active combatants or surrenders willingly. Those who surrender will be cursed, rendering them unable to use mana for twenty-four hours. During this tournament, all magical effects and damage



received will be doubled, and magic capacity will also be doubled.” Her gaze swept over the group. “Leaving the tournament grounds will be considered a form of surrender.”

Aaron stared at Sarah with intrigue as she revealed her ability, a more expansive iteration of the one Aaron had previously witnessed.

Incredible.

Recalling Vendin’s instruction, Aaron willed Sylvia’s Aevum Dagger to transform into a substantial sword. This was an innate ability of the weapon that he’d diligently practiced, and it seemed that preparation was paying off sooner than he’d expected.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Aaron said apprehensively.

Sarah met his gaze, her expression confident. “The Branders may be skilled assassins, but there are always weaknesses to exploit. With enough time, I can take out the man in black clothing.”

“I’ve got the big guy,” Vendin breathed, reaching to his chest and clutching a small necklace that dangled from his neck for a moment before redrawing his daggers.

“I’ll handle the other one, then,” Aaron nodded, casting his gaze on the woman stretched into a low prowl.

“That one’s a Beastling, but her magic capacity should be weaker than yours,” Sarah informed him.

Aaron raised an eyebrow. “A Beastling?”

“Yes, or Beastkin, if you prefer,” Sarah confirmed. “Creatures from Hizaru Magakt, north of the Second Kingdom. It’s rare to see them this far west, but slavery has spread their kind far. Don’t let her appearance fool you though; she can still be a dangerous opponent.”

Aaron narrowed his focus on his opponent, taking Sarah’s advice to heart. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Remember your training,” Vendin reminded him, his eyes fixed on his own opponent in the distance. “You possess more power than you may realize. Show them what the Aevum name has given you.”

“Very well,” Aaron replied.

End of Preview — Asteria: A World Unbound

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